The New Criterion

January 1997

A monthly review *edited by Hilton Kramer*

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Notes & Comments: January 1997

Standardizing the substandard

Writing about the academic culture wars, we have often had occasion to warn about the institutionalization of a 1960s-style radicalism. Although it is an inelegant mouthful, that polysyllabic phrase seemed the neatest formula for describing the disturbing transformation of cultural radicalism from a force besieging the establishment from the outside into a blithely accepted—even celebrated—aspect of the very establishment culture it had once sought to destroy. This project of redefinition—of the fringe as mainstream, the periphery as center, the deviant as normal—is enormously complex and has wrought still unfathomed changes in our society and way of looking at the world.

Indeed, a full inventory of such changes would amount to a chronicle of a revolution—a cultural revolution in which the moral and intellectual fruits of our civilization have been dangerously compromised by principles whose full implications have yet to reveal themselves. As with any revolution, there are dramatic, even melodramatic, episodes to be recounted. In day to day life, however, America's cultural revolution long ago began working itself out most patently in the pedestrian activities of establishment bureaucracies.

We were reminded of this recently when a press release from the Association of Literary Scholars and Critics crossed our desk. The ALSC, founded in 1994 to provide an independent alternative to the Modern Language Association and its radical buffoonery, is one of the few bright spots on the academic landscape today. With a robust membership now totaling about two thousand, it has emerged as a staunch defender of literary values at a time when literature—when cultural life generally—is everywhere subordinated to the egalitarian political agendas bequeathed to us by the 1960s. The latest benison performed by the ALSC has been to publicize and forthrightly to condemn the "Standards for the English Language Arts" that the National Council of Teachers of English recently promulgated for students from kindergarten through high school. The ALSC urged the rejection of these new standards—which seem already to have been widely adopted—"because of their disdain for literature, and because they reflect the widespread moral and intellectual confusion that has recently infected education at the college level."

As the statement from the ALSC notes, the new standards "drastically diminish" the role of literature in the teaching of what the NCTE calls "language arts"—a phrase that is itself a splendid piece of bureaucratic euphemism, concealing as it does a concerted

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shift away from literature toward politics in the new standards. It is bad enough that only one of the twelve standards advocated by the NCTE is devoted to literature; even more insidious is the sociological imperative that infuses the document and according to which literature is henceforth to be taught not as literature but as a cultural artifact no different in kind from, say, advertising, political propaganda, or television. "Literary criteria," the ALSC notes, "are subverted by a relentless and misguided intellectual egalitarianism."

If this seems overstated, consider that in the "Professional Summary" of the standards published by the NCTE, teachers are urged to adopt an "expanded definition of literacy" in which "being literate . . . means being active, critical, and creative users of print and spoken language as well as the visual language of film and television, commercial and political advertising, photography and more." In other words, in this "expanded" definition of literacy, watching TV—"creatively," of course—might just as well qualify as an example of "literacy" as mastering *Paradise Lost*. In brief, this is an exercise in semantic "expansion" that George Orwell would have admired as an accomplished example of Newspeak.

Insofar as these new standards are enforced, artistic and literary concerns will perforce take a distant back seat to other imperatives. Accordingly, the new standards employ all the latest multicultural buzz words. They speak, for example, of teaching students "to view and critique [*sic*] American and world history and contemporary life," of choosing "texts" on account of their "relevance" to students' interest—instead of their intrinsic merit—and of encouraging students to develop "an understanding of and respect for diversity in language use, patterns and dialects across cultures, ethnic groups, etc."

Et cetera, indeed. The ALSC document notes that the Department of Education, an original supporter of the new standards, withdrew funding because of concerns about "lack of educational substance." This might seem like a good thing. But it is worth remembering that the Department of Education under the Clinton administration has made similar standards a priority. In the "Goals 2000: Educate America Act," signed into law in March 1994, the effort to force states and localities to adopt "gender equitable and multicultural materials" played a prominent role. The purpose of this legislation, as one critic observed, was to encourage "egalitarian character transformation"—an enterprise that has more to do with reeducation than education.

In any event, the NCTE standards are starry-eyed and naïve as well as misguided. According to the Professional Summary, "all students in this country can achieve the standards set forth in this document"—even if, as is said in the mandatory political coda, "standards alone cannot erase the impact of poverty, ethnic or cultural discrimination, low levels of family literacy, and social and political disenfranchisement." But think about it: what kind of "standards" are they that "all students in this country can achieve"? There is also the unhappy irony that this document proposing to enhance literacy should itself be full of subliterate bureaucratic doublespeak: "Students," we read, "employ a wide range of strategies as they write and use different writing process elements appropriately to communicate with different audiences for a variety of purposes." Writing *what* elements? Writing process *what*? We suppose that such rebarbative nonsense is only to be expected from "expanded definitions of literacy"—which is one reason that we would settle for encouraging the old-fashioned, narrow brand of literacy in which being able to read intelligently and write clearly were paramount tests of accomplishment.

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Upchucking for art—or was it "speech" the fellow vomited upon Mondrian & Dufy?

That we live in wondrous times is no longer news, of course. Technological miracles abound, behavior once thought esoteric, outrageous, or illegal is now acclaimed as virtuous, liberating, and chic, and the frontiers of creative expression have been expanded beyond the wildest dreams of the avant-gardes of yesteryear. The expansion of those frontiers is nowadays, indeed, a subject of instruction in the classroom, the art school, and the university seminar. Foundations support it, the media applaud it, and our institutions of high culture hasten to bask in the glory of serving its most outré interests.

That we may also be living in barbarous times—right there, in those very same classrooms, foundations, and institutions of high culture—is a matter that upright, enlightened, liberal-minded folk would mostly rather not think about, especially in relation to what is now said to constitute artistic endeavor. In the name of art, after all, everything is now permitted. Nothing can any longer be disapproved of or disavowed. How can such absolute freedom—the freedom we have fought so hard for in the schools, in the media, and in the courts to achieve—be thought to have produced barbarous results? Surely it is all simply a problem of improving public perception, increasing comprehension, and diminishing ignorance and prejudice—a problem in the never-ending task of keeping up with the latest advances in creative thought. Or so, at least, we have repeatedly been told.

But then, every so often, there occurs an event—it doesn't have to be world-shaking, either—that concentrates the mind and disabuses even the most steadfast liberal complacency: an act that so utterly violates the norms of decent society that even the most hardened advocates of unfettered creative expression fall silent and appalled at its implications. The case of the Toronto "vomit artist"—as we suppose he must be called—is an event of this remarkable sort.

It seems that a student at the Ontario College of Art and Design in Toronto, having mastered the latest lessons in the dialectic of transgressive artistic expression, has conceived of yet a further means of advancing the cause of aesthetic innovation by combining the activist impulses of performance art with the cynical methods of appropriation art. What this audacious newcomer to the ranks of advanced art appropriates are actual paintings hanging on the walls of our museums—his record so far includes a canvas by Piet Mondrian at the Museum of Modern Art in New York and one by Raoul Dufy at the Art Gallery of Ontario—and what his performance consists of is the self-induced act of vomiting upon them. We are not talking about the soiling of reproductions of these paintings; our Toronto vomit artist upchucks on the pictures themselves.

In response to this unconscionable and possibly criminal vandalism, neither the museums nor the art school in which the vomit artist is enrolled has responded with anything but expressions of shock. And since he claims for his upchucking performances the status of art, on what grounds can these institutions take punitive action? What goes by the name of transgressive art is now very much in vogue, and if the matter should become the subject of a legal action, we will no doubt be told that vomiting of this sort must be considered a form of "speech" and therefore legally protected. The question is whether this episode represents a parody of art or a parody of the law or something worse: a sign of the debased values that produce acts and aspirations of this kind in the name of high art.

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The future of the European past: V

A devitalized wariness

by Ferdinand Mount

Whenever we hear the word culture, we should reach for our scalpels. We will get nowhere if we fail to dissect, divide, discriminate: cultures, not culture. This is particularly true for Europeans. It may be plausible for Americans, inheritors of a continent and a culture which have remained united for two centuries, to think singular. But an inhabitant of any European nation is fooling himself if he talks about European culture as anything but irredeemably plural, an enormous pond muddied by closely related clumps of frogspawn. And if, in considering the condition of our culture, we sidle up to that related question, so alluring in its melancholy, of the death of the European past, then we must ask whose past, and which bits of it are dead or dying?

When people venture into these boggy regions, I think there are at least four distinct but overlapping kinds of loss or threatened loss that they would like to talk about. For convenience, I'll call them: first, the loss of knowledge, also known as the pursuit of ignorance or "dumbing down"; second, vulgarization; third, the loss of the past; and, fourth, the loss of national identity (there is a fifth loss which people don't talk about so much, but I shall say something about it). Unfortunately, most lossmongers do not bother to distinguish between any of them. As a result, their jeremiads tend to be either ill-aimed or deploy excessive firepower for the target in question. I think that both British and American conservatives, though clearly right in some respects, are sometimes mistaken about the extent and nature of the damage. But I do not expect to make many converts on this particular battlefield, since for most combatants it is a question of first digging your trench and then staying in it, while firing continuously into the air. The best to be hoped for is that culture warriors may begin to get a glimmering that there are several different questions bundled up together here, and that they do not all deserve the same somber answer.

Books such as Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind* and J. H. Plumb's *The Death of the Past* have provoked, worried, and stimulated, but they have not always clarified. At times, Bloom, for example, simply rehearses the familiar lament that students these days are appallingly ignorant and obtuse, partly because "the old teachers who loved Shakespeare or Austen or Donne, and whose only reward for teaching was the perpetuation of their taste, have all but disappeared." At other times, the decadence he bemoans seems to be a specifically American disaster; you can become an American in a day, but it is an impoverished, etiolated sort of life you are letting yourself in for. At other times again, he follows Ortega y Gasset in identifying the entire modern world as flat, or narrow, or "built on low but solid ground" (Leo Strauss), wedded to mediocrity and deaf to

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the possibilities of transcendence. Thus, although the book is full of mordant asides and enchanting aphorisms, it is hard to tell whether what is wrong is primarily an educational problem that could be remedied by improving American schools, or an inferiority of national life and character that demands that the U.S. should learn something from other cultures, or a human predicament which we all share in a post-Nietzschean world and which might take a little longer to put right.

We can at any rate start by tackling the simple question which first proposes itself (simple to identify, I mean, not to answer): the "dumbing down" question. Is the general, or average, or median level of education—and hence we may presume, of public discourse—being lowered, year by year, whether deliberately or accidentally?

It is easy enough to find examples from one's own experience where this is so. A nice rarified instance: just before leaving Eton in 1957, I was taken to inspect the Latin and Greek verses which had been "sent up for good" (that is, shown to the Head Master) by Swinburne and one or two of his seventeen-year-old contemporaries at the school. There they were a century later, still tied together with Eton-blue ribbon. The handwriting was beautiful, the standard of versification infinitely higher than anything we could have managed with our mechanistic resort to stock epithets. All the same, we in the 1950s were still being set the same tasks as Swinburne and his contemporaries and embarking upon them at roughly the same age, in our early teens. Today, of course, few boys in Britain, and still fewer in the United States, attempt such versification at all. The classical culture automatically available to, say, the generation of Byron, Peel, and Aberdeen at Harrow School, and to their social inferiors at lesser schools all over the country, has vanished.

Is the same fate now beginning to overtake the broad body of historical knowledge—I mean, "modern history," that is, from the Middle Ages on—which was assumed to be the possession of any educated man? Such knowledge would comprise for an educated Englishman of any class between 1850 and 1950: on the military front, say, some idea of the Hundred Years War, the Wars of the Roses, the Civil War, and the Peninsular War; on the civil front, an understanding (usually of a whiggish sort)

The classical culture automatically available to, say, the generation of Byron, Peel, and Aberdeen at Harrow School, and to their social inferiors at lesser schools all over the country, has vanished.

of the development of Parliament, the rise of social legislation, and the industrialization of the country. But now? Kenneth Baker, a former British education secretary, recently declared in a book review that "the teaching of history before 1900 is fast disappearing from our schools." Two examining boards have withdrawn GCSE exams (the main exam taken in British high schools), on the Tudors and Stuarts and on the Victorian age, because so few pupils were choosing these courses, preferring to opt for post-1900 and world history.

The reduced time left for history in the curriculum of most schools—certainly those attended by my children (now in their mid-twenties)—must have had some effect. After all, to have kept one's historical knowledge to the same approximate level would require a steady *increase* in the amount of time devoted to history. A person who, as well as the knowledge mentioned above, has not also some notion of the course and causes of both world wars and the rise and fall of Nazism and Communism is at least as uneducated as someone who has never read *Hamlet* or *Middlemarch*.

A recent Gallup poll showed that young

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people in particular are more familiar with the characters in TV soap operas than with the leading figures in British history. Seventy-four percent know that the landlady of the Queen Victoria pub in the Cockney saga "EastEnders" is the actress Barbara Windsor, but only 61 percent can identify the real Queen Victoria as Britain's longest serving monarch. I am surprised the score is as high as 61 percent. The fact, after all, is of no huge significance; an educated person might well think that the correct answer was Queen Elizabeth I, George III, or one of the longer-lived Plantagenets. I am more impressed by the fact that 89 percent of the sample, including 82 percent of sixteen- to twenty-four-year-olds, knew that it was Guy Fawkes who tried to blow up the Houses of Parliament in 1605—a fact of considerable significance for the subsequent course of British history and, as it happens, the subject of Mr. Baker's gloomy book review.

One defense to this charge-sheet rests precisely on the fact that these days there is much more to learn. A reasonably dutiful undergraduate today will probably know more chemistry than Goethe knew, more than Prince Rupert or even Robert Boyle did. This defense is far from negligible, though it has its flaws. Many sub-branches of the "modern sciences," after all, are bogus and usurp precious learning time; others don't belong in schools, but can be picked up later at the workplace, or in post-graduate study. Schools should teach more mathematics, less computer science; more history, less history of art; and so on. The modern syllabus does include more genuine topics than the trivium and quadrivium ever dreamed of: more geography, more genetics, more politics. Against that, a new British government inquiry has just shown that the A (for "advanced") level examinations for chemistry, mathematics, and English are easier than they were twenty years ago. Broader means shallower, as Kingsley Amis might have said.

Classical studies, which is enjoying a modest revival on British campuses, now involves a bunch of non-linguistic aspects of classical civilization: slavery, the position of women, legal history, trade flows, medicine, even cookery. Softer options than Sapphics and Alcaics perhaps, but not wholly contemptible if the project is to gain some understanding of the period. The concept of "understanding" is certainly vulnerable to specious and sentimental techniques, notably the "empathizing" approach: "What would a Norman soldier have felt as his boat approached the shore of England in 1066?" All the same, while as keen as anyone to root out this kind of mushy history, I cannot bring myself to argue that what all this betokens is the death of the past in our minds. If anything, it is surely more a symptom of our minds softening, losing edge.

A recent Gallup poll showed that young people in particular are more familiar with the characters in TV soap operas than with the leading figures in British history.

This calls for a pedagogic toughening up, a long march through the educational institutions certainly, but one led by hard-boiled teachers, not by fanatical *Kulturkämpfer*. True, some of the problems do spring from malign ideologies that have attempted to discredit, often with depressing ease, qualities previously thought essential to education, such as effort, competition, and accuracy; they have often managed to outlaw rote learning, written examinations, and other handy devices for fixing knowledge in one's head. Against these *sottises*, the counterattack has begun; it will need to be fierce and sustained. Yet one should add that the overcrowding of the curriculum also springs from the over-eagerness of honest dolts. And even some of the most disastrous wrong turnings—in the teaching of reading, for example—were taken in the

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genuine belief that they really would help children to learn better.

Dumbing down is, I think, a reality and it must be ferociously combatted, but it is not quite the same as vulgarization. There is, I agree, some spillover from the egalitarian fallacies in education to the loathing of high public culture which has pervaded the media. The flight from difficulty is common to both; so is the hostility to elitism. Yet even here there is a distinction to be drawn between what the levelers-down would like to do—namely, efface any distinction between high and low—and the far more important influence of popular taste bringing its own natural weight to bear.

Here we come to a popular-culture dilemma, which is at least as old as the invention of printing. Do you stay in business by giving the public what it wants, or do you give them what you think they ought to have? Caxton's early bestsellers were romances about kings and queens, collections of bawdy tales, and so on. Then as now, the popular market had to be served, for reasons of democracy no less than of commerce. When Sir Kenneth Clark took on the chairmanship in 1954 of the new commercial television authority in Britain, he stated, without any shame, that the *niveau* of the new station was to be that of the *Daily Mirror*—a saucy popular newspaper (these days twice as saucy). Neither he nor anyone else suggested that the new channel had any duty to civilization or any potential to aim higher: those who were opposed to ITV simply asserted that there should be no commercial television at all. Such opponents feared, not so much that commercial television would degrade the tastes of the masses, as that it would serve those preexisting tastes all too faithfully. And they were right.

The progressive vulgarizing of the British popular press—from the Victorian *Daily Telegraph*, to Northcliffe's *Daily Mail*, to Beaverbrook's *Daily Express*, to the old *Daily Mirror*, to Rupert Murdoch's *Sun*—can be seen as a kind of breaking through the upper and middle strata of seriousness and respectability to meet a vulgarity which was always lurking there, down at rock bottom. After all, you have to remember that the bestseller of 1528 was the tale of "How Howleglas set his hostess upon the hot ashes with her bare arse." If Hieronymous Bosch, why not Quentin Tarantino? If obscene puns are tolerable in Rabelais, or in Joyce, why not in the *Sun*? If T. S. Eliot, Proust, and Max Beerbohm all loved the music hall, why shouldn't we love soap operas?

To blame "commercial pressures" is a comfortable evasion. Pop culture *is* popular, likely to remain so, and cannot and should not be suppressed. Liberal democracy can muster no justification for stemming the flow of vulgarity, either by direct *diktat* or by indirect pressure. Democracy entails vulgarity, though it does not prescribe it.

The progressive vulgarizing of the British popular press can be seen as a kind of breaking through the upper and middle strata of seriousness and respectability to meet a vulgarity which was always lurking there, down at rock bottom.

Dumbing down is a patronizing misunderstanding of democracy, but vulgarization is democracy's natural accompaniment.

In any case, vulgarization is not the same as the murder of the past. For vulgarization is no more hostile to the past than it is to the present; on the contrary, the vulgarizer responds with enthusiasm to cobwebs and crinolines and crusades. Hollywood cheapens, anachronizes, misshapes the past. But then it misshapes the present, and the future too, with the same innocent gusto. Hollywood has no more accurate notion of modern family life, say, than it has of the age of Louis XIV or ancient Rome.

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By contrast, actual hatred of the past goes together with something quite different, with longing for a *tabula rasa*. Mao believed the Chinese to be "poor and blank"; that was what was so wonderful about them, because on a blank sheet of paper "the freshest and most beautiful characters can be written." Such yearnings to shake off the bonds of tradition, to make people over from scratch without any inherited sclerosis, that is a *political* project, one which is not at all the same as the dumbing-down process and will coincide with the latter only briefly, before moving in the opposite direction, that of interfering with and eventually suppressing popular tastes, as all effective dictatorships do—and must do—in their heyday. Hatred of the past is a disease of disenchanted intellectuals, not a consequence of vulgarization.

There is a milder variant of the revolutionary's outright hatred of the past, namely, the progressive's wish to be free of its shackles. Plumb, for example, as a good whig, ends his book with this blast:

> The old past is dying, its force weakening, and so it should. Indeed the historian should speed it on its way, for it was compounded of bigotry, of national vanity, of class domination. It was as absurd as that narrow Christian interpretation which Gibbon rightly scorned. May history step into its shoes, help to sustain man's confidence in his destiny, and create for us a new past as true, as exact, as we can make it, that will help us achieve our identity, not as Americans or Russians, Chinese or Britons, black or white, rich or poor, but as men.

There seems to be a contradiction lurking somewhere in there. If we are to be genuinely free of the past, why do we need historians? Conversely, the attempt to trace some kind of "ascent of man"—as Plumb says historians should—demands some degree of historicism; if it is a mountain or even a gentle gradient that over the centuries we have been climbing, the slope has to have existed before we did and our future must be partly determined by our past, so we cannot be free of it.

But, just as Keynes said that "practical men who believe themselves to be free from any intellectual influences are usually the slaves of some defunct economist," so our enthrallment to our past does not depend upon our consciousness of it or upon any profound understanding of that past. A living culture is a dialogue between past and present but a dialogue in which one or the other may be unheard or indistinct, a Burkean contract but one that you may be unaware of having signed. Even in a religious context, the declaration, "Behold I make all things new," is more a cry for attention than a comprehensive truth. We discard parts of our past, take up others with fresh interest. This, after all, is what cultural historians show us doing ever since the last millennium, just as they show an appetite for vulgarity limited only by the unremitting censorship of the authorities.

For that reason, the vulgarization of the public media seems to me at worst harmless and at best a symptom of continuing resistance to dubious attempts to "improve" us. Those of us who wish to elevate public taste in the marketplace by, say, promoting the serious discussion of books would do better to suspend our lamentations now and then and set out to win more readers. We have to manage the feat which comes so hard to *enragés*, of keeping two ideas in one's head at the same time: that in a democracy people must not and cannot be prevented from taking their fun as they find it; but that, at the same time, we elevators of public taste have a duty to keep on offering the highest we can come up with, regardless of whether "they" love it when they see it.

It is certainly true that one field in which we wish to cultivate the highest—and here we move on to the next form of purported loss—is our own past. In this field, conservatives do have a specific crusade to wage; for here it is essential to insist, not only that culture largely consists in the accumulated deposit of the past and is impoverished if

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these deposits are neglected, but that we have a duty to pay particular attention to those deposits which are particularly ours, which have made us what we are, as a people, as a nation.

Yet no sooner have I said this than I want to stop and dig in my heels at the huge overestimation of the threat presently posed to our culture, or, worse still, our "identity"—a rather more elusive concept. In particular, the claim that "multiculturalism" is menacing our sense of who we are—American, English, or whatever—seems to me sinister and farcical in equal measure.

Vulgarization is not the same as the murder of the past. Hatred of the past is a disease of disenchanted intellectuals, not a consequence of vulgarization.

Do the intellectuals who broadcast these grim vaticinations ever go to a football match? Can they not see how easily and strongly the modern nation exerts its grip upon the speech, manners, and loyalty of its citizens? Have they not the slightest inkling of, say, how indelibly American the most anti-American American activist, black or white, seems to any foreigner? The nationalist always has this strange split mind: the national identity seems to him incredibly important and yet at the same time woefully fragile, as though it were something both as precious and as easy to lose as the crease in his trousers is to a dandy.

Despite all predictions of increasing global homogeneity, as the years go by, the Americans become more American, the Canadians stay Canadian, the Australians remain Australian, and even the poor British retain not only their national characteristics, but many of these regional ones which the BBC was supposed to have ironed out a generation ago. Yorkshiremen, for example, retain the same stubbornness, the same awkward conceit of themselves as they had in Tudor times; read Giraldus's comprehensive account of the characteristics of the Welsh in the twelfth century, and you could be in a Swansea pub in the 1990s.

Multiculturalism may be a threat to, say, the study of literature in the academy, when second-rate works by female black poets crowd out Melville and Hawthorne, but as a threat to national consciousness, it seems to me to rank pretty near zero.

The multicultural threat most often mentioned in the United States—that of the Hispanic concentrations in Florida and elsewhere in the South and Southwest—only shows how feeble and illusory the threat really is, when considered with any care. As Mark Falcoff has pointed out in a recent essay (reprinted in the *Times Literary Supplement* for May 17, 1996), the Hispanic culture cannot represent any kind of long-term challenge to the dominance of English-speaking America, since it has no single mother country to draw sustenance from (unlike the French in Canada), it has no historic territorial base within the United States, nor does speaking Spanish offer much of an avenue to advancement for the next generation.

Cases where rival pasts have been unearthed and made much of—as in Scotland, say—do not represent much of a threat to the survival of the dominant, in our case, the English past. On the contrary, particular revivals of this type seem to be a part of a general revival of interest in all our pasts. Never has the devotion to what survives of our heritage been more ubiquitously imprinted on every tea towel and backdropped into every television ad. Kitsch no doubt, but if the tidal wave of kitsch the intellectual Jeremiah claims we are drowning under includes the very same nostalgia and sense of loss that the intellectual himself feels (though vilely debased, of course), then he cannot claim to be the sole *laudator temporis acti*, even if he alone may be able to translate the phrase.

Nor need this interest in the past be a passive, inert thing. On the contrary, for present-day novelists it is a driving obses-

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sion, a source of fantasy and comedy, a line of destiny to be traced like a lifeline in a hand, a wellspring of regret. There is hardly an English-speaking corner of the globe untouched by novelists grubbing for roots.

We have to manage the feat of keeping two ideas in one's head at the same time: that in a democracy people must not and cannot be prevented from taking their fun as they find it; but that, at the same time, we elevators of public taste have a duty to keep on offering the highest we can come up with, regardless of whether "they" love it when they see it.

In Canada, for example, Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient* commutes between the last years of World War II and modern Toronto; Carol Shields in *The Stone Diaries* traces the hard destiny of a rural family from the nineteenth century to the present; Mordecai Richler's *Solomon Gursky Was Here* takes us from Sir John Franklin's search for the Northwest frontier through the bootleg years down to postwar plutocracy. Perhaps the more dazzling of all recent historical novels is E. Annie Proulx's *The Shipping News*, which "does" the Newfoundland coast so subtly that the novel does not even feel historical. In Australia, David Malouf and Thomas Keneally rehearse the same transition from a brutal, lawless pioneering to a soft, sleazy present, while Shena Mackay's *Dunedin* performs a comparable trick for the relationship between Britain and New Zealand. In Britain itself, there is a whole range of historical delving, from recreations such as Peter Ackroyd's *Hawksmoor* and *Chatterton* to minuets between the past and the present such as John Fowles's *French Lieutenant's Woman* and A. S. Byatt's *Possession*. Not to mention Beryl Bainbridge's tableaux of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, bringing back to life such resonant and tragic events as Scott's last journey and the sinking of the Titanic. And I have not begun to count the horde of precious and semiprecious stones streaming out of India and her diaspora: the Naipaul brothers, Salman Rushdie, Vikram Seth, Rohinton Mistry, all in one way or another concerned with tracing the subcontinent's legacy to the world. A rough comparison with the fiction of the nineteenth and early twentieth century will show an engagement with the past which was far less intense and fruitful.

But while artists have always drawn strength and material from their national pasts, it should be clearly understood that it is not their task to succor or inflate national consciousness. The relationship is and ought to be the other way around: everything that goes into national feeling—language, landscape, history—flows into the artist, but as soon as the artist attempts to pump extra vitality back into national feeling, he is almost always betrayed into bad art. The great artist—Beethoven, Mann, Yeats—not only swiftly repents of any national-political celebration he may have been lured into but is unflinching in counting the cost to others:

> Did that play of mine send out
> Certain men the English shot.

Thus of the four threats intertwined in the conservative lament, I worry about only one: the "dumbing down," which does represent a serious degradation of our educational standards, but which is ultimately remediable and which educational reforms, in Britain at least, have some hope of reversing over the course of a generation, for the simple reason that the majority of parents will not tolerate another lost generation.

Of the other three threats, I think little. Vulgarization is an incapable consequence

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of democracy; it has its blowsy charms; and in certain forms, it can act as a bulwark of our political traditions. Nor do I think the past is dying away from our minds; on the contrary, there is a widespread longing that it should be more vividly present to us. Still less do I think that any of our national identities is under threat. Multiculturalism is at worst a congeries of small sillinesses and at best a form of courtesy to insecure immigrants. But here is a further kind of loss which we in Britain suffered a long time ago and which is not much mentioned. Of all the threats to culture in Britain, the only one that seems to have any real substance is the loss of our common European heritage.

From the 1880s on, perhaps much earlier if we are to believe Matthew Arnold, British culture cut itself off and developed into something defensive, provincial, parochial even, tame. Two world wars helped to reinforce our insularity and cultural autarky. Decade by decade, we lost the old ease of intellectual commerce across the whole continent of Europe, that sense of belonging to a common conversation.

This is certainly *not* to say that the European Union, either now or in the future, is going to be a leading element in rekindling that conversation. In its cultural efforts, the European Union is a sort of well-meaning Euro-Disney, attempting to homogenize what is neither homogenous nor homogeneous, and generalizing what is of its essence particular. Nonetheless, the European Union does provide an essential underpinning. Little by little, the Single European Market and the habits of daily negotiation within the EU, however fractious and time consuming, begin to make the old insularity look absurd.

That is not how the conservative press in Britain sees it, but then, to the rest of Europe and to a large part of the British public, the conservative press and the Europhobes seem absurd—not wrong necessarily on important practical issues, such as monetary union—but absurd, nonetheless. And their attempts to compare the EU with Napoleon's empire or Hitler's are as deranged as comparing the Athenaeum club with Auschwitz.

Yet perhaps the nationalists in the Conservative Party are not as stupid as they seem. Perhaps there is some ulterior wisdom in their prickly refusal of any further entanglement with the Continent. If we keep ourselves to ourselves, then perhaps we can retain our illusions about ourselves in general, and about our high culture in particular.

We can go on believing that our stale and timid figurative painters are great masters in the European tradition, that Elgar is a great composer, that A. S. Byatt is as good as Gabrial García Márquez—but the catalogue is too depressing to rehearse. I greatly enjoy the conservative attack on the cheap, phony, and derivative stuff served up by certain fashionable artists and writers, the purveyors of piss and excrement, the glorifiers of mutilation and corpse-kissing, these stale spinoffs of Duchamp and Artaud, but I cannot help noticing an uneasy silence when, say, one turns to that excellent periodical *Modern Painters* to see what the cultural conservative would bring forward in their stead. I recall, for example, the exhibition "Paradise Lost" at the Barbican Gallery, a retrospective of the British neo-Romantic art of the 1940s. Charming and infinitely evocative as it was, again and again one could not shut one's eyes to the sheer technical incompetence, the feebleness of the draftsmanship, the timidity of conception, the easy sentimentality. The traditional culture that we are so eager to defend has run thin in places—and, to put it no higher, we may suspect that its walling-off within the compound of the nation hasn't helped.

There is quite a lot to be said against the "multiculturalist novel," for example, most of which we are too polite to say: that it achieves some of its comic and piquant effects through cheap juxtapositions (of white speech and manners alongside the half-mangled, half-parodied immigrant ver-

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sions), that many of its themes—rootlessness, relativism, alienation—are rather glibly exploited, that it lacks human depth. One may say all this, yet one then has to turn to the *echt*-British article and look hard, very hard, to find the same exuberance and energy, the same sense of engaging, however cack-handedly, with the times that you find in Salman Rushdie and Timothy Mo.

Nor does this kind of critique apply to art alone, although it is in the arts that its effect is most conspicuous, because artists can up sticks when they fear their native culture is stifling them—by its dullness, its pride in its limitations, its suspicions. Though never a keen admirer of D. H. Lawrence, I remember how struck I was on first reading his piece *Dull London*: "the first half-hour in London after some years abroad, is really a plunge of misery. The strange, the grey and the uncanny, almost deathly sense of *dullness* is overwhelming." Of course, England was the easiest country in the world and the English people the nicest:

> But this very easiness and this very niceness become at last a nightmare. It is as if the whole air were impregnated with chloroform or some other pervasive anesthetic, that makes everything easy and nice, and takes the edge off everything, whether nice or nasty. As you inhale the drug of easiness and niceness, your vitality begins to sink. Perhaps not your physical vitality, but something else: the vivid flame of your individual life.

Lawrence was ill, dying in fact, and even when he had been well, he was always a monumental complainer. Yet his impatience still hits a nerve, and you begin to remember why English writers and artists used to live abroad.

Politicians and jurists are by their trade confined to their own country. Yet unless refreshed by dialogue with other traditions, they too lose critical edge. I fervently believe in and have great affection for our British methods of proceeding by precedent, by attending to each case as it comes, yet there are historical moments when we need to raise our hearts from the casebook and sniff the outside air; the impact of European institutions upon our law and Parliament is only one example, though a striking one, of our failure to engage with the realities of the modern world. We joined the Common Market over twenty years ago, yet the House of Commons has only this summer begun to demand that an English text of every proposal be laid before them and the minister responsible come to be questioned before going to Brussels to decide the matter. We signed the European Convention of Human Rights over forty years ago; most English and Scottish judges now treat it as an informal part of our law, yet Parliament still refuses to enact it into law, which means that cases brought under the Convention still have to go, at huge expense, to Strasburg, instead of being decided in the first instance by British judges.

The greatest cause for optimism in Europe is that there is so little optimism about, for optimism implies some degree of self-satisfaction. And perhaps the regrowth of interest in all our pasts comes not so much from a sentimental urge to recapture something we have lost as from a feeling that we ought to retrace our path in order to see where we went wrong.

The pretense of self-sufficiency is a costly one and, because it is only a pretence, ultimately enervating, leading to inevitable frustration and resentment.

This is not a critique of high British culture alone. Conservative critics in France, such as Marc Fumaroli and George Liébert,

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make much the same critique of their situation. The same lament can be heard in Germany, too, and in China and a half-dozen other countries. Nor is it an unqualified or wholehearted critique; it is one which would take a good deal more arguing.

It is relevant here for one reason only: that it provokes, in me at any rate, an uncomfortable suspicion that conservatives on both sides of the Atlantic like to lament the destruction of the past when what they are secretly, perhaps unconsciously, lamenting is the exhaustion of the present. It is easier these days to identify an enemy than a hero, but then perhaps it always was.

Yet, I am reluctant to sign off with an ironic whimper, a limply raised eyebrow. Some plain things are worth saying plainly: that more or less democratic governments are today well entrenched from the Atlantic to the Urals; that the discontent with the European Union is, in comparison with this great circumstance (unique in our century or any other), a fairly secondary matter; that the threat of neo-nationalism, though ugly, is also minor, being mostly a reaction to the piping times of peace, and not confined to nations crammed together in unwelcome supranational associations (it's happening in Japan and a dozen other countries too); that, when we turn to the arts, we find a situation not unprecedented, namely that some of them appear stalled up a cul-de-sac, while others—the novel, architecture, perhaps poetry—are producing work which often stirs and occasionally captivates.

It is possible, if you try hard enough, to find people still spouting the old rubbish—for example, that the Cold War was not worth winning, that the family is dying or ought to be, that art is nothing if it is not revolutionary—but where I come from, people who say these things are greeted with yawns.

One may reproach the European present with many things—a lack of ambition, a devitalized sort of wariness. But we might also describe these qualities as the defects of our virtues: we may seem disenchanted because we have most of us ceased to be enchanted by cruel and fatuous ideologies.

To say this is not to express some kind of reach-me-down optimism (somewhere under the dead leaves new growth is stirring). On the contrary, the greatest cause for optimism in Europe is that there is so little optimism about, for optimism implies some degree of self-satisfaction. And perhaps the regrowth of interest in all our pasts comes not so much from a sentimental urge to recapture something we have lost as from a feeling that we ought to retrace our path in order to see where we went wrong. Perhaps we should have followed Gladstone, not Marx; William James rather than Freud; Arnold Bennett, not Virginia Woolf; Lutyens, not Le Corbusier. In our voyage of rediscovery, we shall need more accurate instruments of navigation and a log that is better kept. But for most of us, the past still has work to do.

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Bloomsbury revised: a "postmodern" Roger Fry

by Hilton Kramer

There appears to be no end in sight to the mythification of Bloomsbury. As a phenomenon of late twentieth-century Anglo-American cultural life, Bloomsbury has long ceased to be the coterie interest it once was. It has expanded its domain to become one of the mainstream myths of the modern era. In the universities, the study of Bloomsbury is a flourishing industry. On the literary scene, its participants are the subject of an immense biographical and critical literature. Even more improbably, the sex life of Bloomsbury has found its way into the manufacture of romantic idylls for the stage and screen. (Who, even a few years ago, would have dreamed that a character as unappetizing as Lytton Strachey could be turned into a romantic figure for the movies?) If there is not yet a Bloomsbury coloring book, there is already a Virginia Woolf calendar and a Virginia Woolf T-shirt. It hardly matters, moreover, that Bloomsbury produced, besides Virginia Woolf, only two other important talents: John Maynard Keynes and Roger Fry. It is in the nature of the mythification process that minor talents—and even people of no discernible talent at all—are elevated to a status that far exceeds their intrinsic interest. Whatever they may have lacked as writers, artists, or thinkers, these minor characters are assumed to command some enduring appeal simply on the basis of the roles they played in the lives of Bloomsbury eminences.

As the Bloomsbury juggernaut approaches a new millennium, moreover, we are sure to see further wonders offered in its name. The mythification process certainly shows no sign of abatement. Yet the meaning of the myth is bound to undergo some significant modifications as it accommodates itself to new cultural conditions.

Now, just a little in advance of the new millennium, comes a glimpse of what the "new" Bloomsbury is probably going to look like. If the views of Christopher Reed, the editor of *A Roger Fry Reader*,[1] are to be taken as an augury—and there is ample reason to suppose that they are—then the new Bloomsbury, a Bloomsbury more suitable to the early decades of the twenty-first century, will be a "postmodern" Bloomsbury. This is bad luck for an old Bloomsbury hand like Peter Stansky, whose new study of the subject, *On or About December 1910: Early Bloomsbury and Its Intimate World*,[2] has also just been published and has already been rendered redundant by Mr. Reed's revisionism. Mr. Stansky, the Frances and Charles Field Professor of History at Stanford University, takes what may now be said to be the old view: that the history of

1 *A Roger Fry Reader*, edited and with introductory essays by Christopher Reed; University of Chicago Press, 440 pages, $50; $19.95 paper.

2 *On or About December 1910: Early Bloomsbury and Its Intimate World*, by Peter Stansky; Harvard University Press, 289 pages, $27.95.

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Bloomsbury belongs to the history of modernism. From Mr. Reed's revisionist perspective, this old view will no longer do. "I am concerned," he writes in his Introduction to *A Roger Fry Reader*, "to describe Fry's activism in its historical context, with reference to the concerns and interests associated with postmodernism."

Are we now, then, to regard Fry himself as a postmodernist? Well, sort of. Mr. Reed labors mightily to create the impression that inside the modernist Roger Fry there was all along a postmodernist provocateur struggling to make himself heard. In this regard, certainly, Mr. Reed shows himself to be a dab hand at postmodernist bodysnatching. It isn't until the concluding pages of this volume, by which time—owing to his extensive commentaries and notes—it has become almost as much a Christopher Reed Reader as *A Roger Fry Reader*, and after much belaboring of the "historical context," that Mr. Reed can bring himself to acknowledge that "Fry is not, of course, a postmodernist." Yet even this *pro forma* admission is quickly followed by the inevitable disclaimer. "Nevertheless," Mr. Reed reminds us, "today's readers may find, in Fry's consistent foregrounding in his personal subjectivity, in his antagonism toward authority, and, finally, in his doubt, a figure far more sympathetic than we have been led to expect." In short, a postmodernist *avant la lettre*. As if modernism has remained untouched by such phenomena as "personal subjectivism"—what other kind is there, by the way?—or "antagonism toward authority" or even "doubt." For an exponent of "historical context," Mr. Reed proves to be a remarkably unreliable guide to history—especially the history of modernism, which is the subject he has undertaken to deconstruct in this book.

Anyone familiar with the strategies of postmodernist discourse will readily recognize, of course, that it is now standard procedure for its practitioners to invoke the claims of "historical context" for what actually amounts to a project of historical nullification. The only wonder in this case is that Mr. Reed should have chosen Roger Fry, of all unlikely candidates, for a project of this kind. Attempting to annex Fry—the greatest modernist critic of his day—to the bandwagon of postmodernism is, after all, a little like trying to assign Cézanne to the ranks of his *pompier* adversaries. It can be done, I suppose, but what except errant ideological nonsense has been accomplished in the process? The work itself will simply not support such an ill-conceived endeavor.

It is significant, in this respect, that in the passage I have already cited from Mr. Reed's Introduction to *A Roger Fry Reader* he should speak of the critic's "activism" rather than of his art criticism. Activism, which is to say social activism, is an enterprise dear to the hearts of every true postmodernist, whereas criticism—especially the kind of formalist criticism that Fry practiced in the heyday of his fame and influence—is regarded as mere grist for the postmodernist's deconstructionist mill. It is very much to Mr. Reed's purpose in assembling and annotating *A Roger Fry Reader* for a new generation of readers—readers unlikely to be familiar with Fry's writings on art—to give priority to what he describes as Fry's "sense of social purpose" while at the same time discounting the criticism that established Fry as the leading champion of modernism in the English-speaking world of his generation. Thus, from the two collections of Fry's critical essays that have long been regarded as classic contributions to the literature of modernism—*Vision and Design* (1920) and *Transformations* (1926)—Mr. Reed has chosen exactly nothing for this new *Reader*. This is in itself an act of historical nullification that leaves the newcomer to Fry's criticism unequipped to judge either the quality of his performance as a modernist critic or, indeed, the character of the distortions which Mr. Reed has been obliged to impose on Fry's critical *oeuvre* in the interest of claiming him as some sort of proto-postmodernist.

It is worth recalling, in this connection, that in the "Retrospect" which Fry ap-

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pended to the essays he collected in *Vision and Design*, he famously defined his critical credo. "I conceived the form of a work of art to be its most essential quality," he wrote, adding in the same essay that "I conceived the form and the emotion which it conveyed as being inextricably bound together in the aesthetic whole." What he elsewhere in *Vision and Design* described as "the aesthetic vision, the vision with which we contemplate works of art," remained for Fry his fundamental critical priority. It was the sensibility and intellectual tenacity with which he applied his own "aesthetic vision" to the contemplation of works of art—and not only works of modernist art, of course—that gave his criticism its immense persuasive force and made Fry himself a crucial figure in the history of English modernism even for the many artists, art historians, cultural bureaucrats, and amateurs of the arts who dissented from his judgments and opposed his principles.

It is also important to recall that Fry did not come to modernism as an avant-garde incendiary. Far from it. He came to modernism after a protracted immersion in the art of the Italian Renaissance masters. It was in that field of connoisseurship, where he labored first as a disciple and then as a rival of Bernard Berenson, that Fry made his debut as a recognized authority on the art of painting.[3] When he took up the cause of modernist painting in the first decade of the twentieth century, giving priority to the work of Cézanne and Matisse, he thus brought to it a keen sense of the pictorial traditions in terms of which the modernist painters he favored needed to be seen to be fully understood. He did not regard modernism, as so many doctrinaire avant-gardists did, as a break with tradition. Fry's understanding of the relation of the modernist painters to the traditions that preceded and nurtured them is now something we take for granted, of course, but it was a highly controversial idea at the time. Moreover, it remained a fundamental *donnée* of Fry's criticism to the end. In 1930, twenty years after he organized the first "Post-Impressionism" exhibition in London, Fry devoted a monograph to Matisse which was similarly based on what he called "this long approach" to a modernist painter by way of traditions traced back to Byzantine art and the paintings of Caravaggio. It is one of the virtues of *A Roger Fry Reader*, by the way, that it reprints the text of the *Henri Matisse* monograph in its entirety. It is one of the failings of this volume, however, that it includes none of Fry's writings on Italian painting—another omission that effectively eliminates one of the foundations of his critical thought.

In this respect, as in others, *A Roger Fry Reader* is a book very much at odds with itself, for it seems to have been designed to serve as both an indictment and a defense of its subject. What is under indictment—much of the time, anyway—is not so much Fry's modernism as the bogeyman of "formalism," with which modernism is routinely identified when it suits Mr. Reed's critical agenda. It is thus one of the aims of the *Reader* to rescue Fry from his reputation as a formalist critic—"the ponderous 'Father of Formalism,'" as Mr. Reed puts it, who would now have to be considered "the figurehead of a discredited age"—in order to recast him as a cultural emancipator on the social barricades.

At times, then, this obliges Mr. Reed to separate the "good" Fry—the kind of modernist who, as an "activist" battling for cultural reform, can somehow be construed to have been a precursor of the postmodernist assault on a privileged aesthetic—from the "bad" Fry, who is seen to have succumbed to a weakness for the sort of formalist criticism that gives priority to (what else?) a privileged "aesthetic vision." If all this sounds like something of a muddle—well, I am afraid this *Reader* very often does col-

3 For an account of Fry's study of Italian painting, see the new edition of *Giovanni Bellini*, his first book, originally published in 1899, which the Ursus Press brought out in 1995 with an Introduction by David Alan Brown and an Afterword by me.

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lapse into a muddle from which the real Roger Fry is absent for pages at a time.

The muddle is somewhat clarified, to be sure, if close attention is paid not only to the ninety or so pages of tendentious commentaries which Mr. Reed has contributed to the *Reader* but also to the seventeen pages of notes that are appended to the commentaries. In a good many of those pages we are a long way from the Bloomsbury we once knew—we are, indeed, catapulted into the college classrooms of the 1990s where Mr. Reed is offering us a refresher course in the kind of cultural politics that now occupy a place of unchallenged privilege in American academic life.

In this postmodernist wonderland, we once again encounter Benjamin Buchloh instructing us in the evils of "advanced capitalism"—in which evils, not surprisingly, "the prisonhouse of modernism" is said to be complicit. Here, too, postmodernist doctoral dissertations on the politics of Bloomsbury are solemnly cited to support the notion that "Fry's texts [on African sculpture] contribute to the twentieth-century project of conceiving a postcolonial world." Then, of course, there is the expected assault on the art criticism of Clement Greenberg, without which no postmodernist discussion of bogeyman formalism would nowadays be compete. And for newcomers to the subject, there are convenient references to the political literature that attempts to reduce not only Clement Greenberg's criticism but the entire post-World War II New York School to the status of a Cold War foreign-policy strategy. To bring us fully up to date, moreover, Mr. Reed refers us to his own recent contribution to postmodernist studies—an essay called "Making History: The Bloomsbury Group's Construction of Aesthetic and Sexual Identity," published in a volume called *Gay and Lesbian Studies in Art History*, edited by Whitney Davis and published by the Haworth Press in 1994. Some of the claims that Mr. Reed makes for the influence of Whistler and Wilde on Fry in the *Reader* are spelled out in more explicit political detail in this essay on "Aesthetic and Sexual Identity."

Given this deeply prejudicial approach to Fry's art criticism, it is a considerable mercy that there is as much good reading in the *Reader* as there is. While the book is very far from bringing together the best of Fry's writings on art—for that kind of *Reader*, the inclusion of certain essays from *Vision and Design* and *Transformations* would be essential—Mr. Reed is nonetheless to be commended for making available some fine examples of Fry's criticism that are otherwise not easily available. I have already mentioned the excellent essay on Matisse. "Picasso" (1921) is interesting now for the glimpse it gives us of Fry's doubts about the capacity of pure abstraction, with its tendency to eliminate the illusion of spatial depth, to produce as rich a pictorial experience as painting that remains tethered to the depiction of a third dimension.

Speaking in this essay of the younger Cubists who were influenced by Picasso, Fry acknowledges that while "there is nothing inherently impossible in the venture to create expressive form out of the minimum of representation possible," he does not find the pictorial result entirely satisfactory. "For some reason," he writes, "the effect on the mind of flat forms is feeble in comparison with the effect of forms that either present or represent relief in three dimensions." Picasso himself, Fry points out, "is keenly aware of this, and nothing in his work is more remarkable than the extraordinary invention he displays in the discovery of new qualities of pigment calculated to suggest the relief of one surface upon another." Yet his doubts persist. "The immense resource of suggesting real distance and, perhaps even more important, the circumambience of space," he writes, "seems to be almost cut off, or at most reduced, in its power to persuade the imagination."

Lest we are tempted to dismiss such doubts as a period failure of taste, it is worth remembering that Frank Stella's

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Working Space, published in 1986, is largely devoted to the same aesthetic doubts. Never mind the problems raised by the art that Stella produced in response to the pictorial issues discussed in *Working Space*. The issues are essentially the same as those raised by Fry in 1921 about the pictorial implications of Cubism—issues (need one add?) that have remained central to formalist criticism down to the present day, and thus an integral component of the internal debate that modernist painting has conducted with itself. It is also interesting to note, in this connection, that in 1913, ten years before the "Picasso" essay, Fry showed distinctly less hesitation in embracing the early abstract painting of Kandinsky, describing two of the artist's *Improvisations* as "pure visual music" and declaring that "I cannot any longer doubt the possibility of emotional expression by such abstract visual signs." The pictorial space in these *Improvisations* retains, however, what Fry called "the immense resource of suggesting real distance." Kandinsky's subsequent elimination of the "resource" from his abstract painting seems not to have elicited any response from Fry, but I think it is accurate to say that he never fully embraced the principles of pure abstraction. He much preferred the kind of "abstraction" that remained attached, however distantly, to some element of representation, and in that respect Fry was very much a partisan of the modernist aesthetic that governed the School of Paris in its heyday in the first quarter of the century.

It is that allegiance that we have to keep in mind in accounting for some of Fry's critical prejudices even in regard to French painting—his disparagement of Monet, for example. For the Paris avant-garde in the early decades of the century, Cézanne was a god and Monet was considered passé. Hence Fry's dismissal of Monet—in a letter that Mr. Reed has included in the *Reader*—as an artist far too dependent upon "the casual dictation of natural appearance." It's a pity that Mr. Reed did not include the discussion devoted to Monet in Fry's *Characteristics of French Art* (1932), for it is a classic example of the way a great painter—in this case, Monet—is bound to be misjudged when approached from the perspective of another great painter—Cézanne—who devised quite opposing principles for his art. It is also an example of how much we can still learn about Monet from Fry, despite his adverse judgment of the artist.

The art of painting does not, alas, appear to be a compelling interest for Mr. Reed. One of the essays I miss the most in this *Reader* is the one that Fry devoted to Albert Pinkham Ryder in the *Burlington Magazine* in April 1908. As far as I know, it has never been reprinted anywhere. Fry became acquainted with Ryder's paintings during his tenure as the curator of the Metropolitan Museum in New York in the first decade of the century. His essay is one of the finest things ever written about Ryder, yet it remains largely unknown. Frances Spalding, in her 1980 biography of Fry, *Roger Fry: Art and Life*, made the mistake of flatly asserting that the critic took no interest whatever in American painting during his tenure at the Met, and it may be that Mr. Reed was misled by this error. But then, the essays on painting omitted from this *Reader* that one would need to know to understand Fry's importance as an art critic would easily fill a volume as large as Mr. Reed's.

Mr. Reed much prefers Fry in his role as an "activist"—which is to say, a propagandist laboring to reform the taste of the obdurate philistines of his day. Through the magic of the postmodernist prism, even a benign little essay on "Wedgewood China," from 1905, can be made to assume the trappings of a social manifesto, especially when linked—as Mr. Reed hastens to do—with the political influence of William Morris and Oscar Wilde. In this regard, much is made of Fry's role in establishing the Omega Workshops, an ill-fated endeavor that attempted to recast the aspirations of the Arts and Crafts movement according to decorative principles based on the Fauvism of Matisse and the Cubism of Picasso. In the history of modernist design, the Omega

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Workshops project is little more than a footnote, but in this *Reader* it is made to sound as if it had been an achievement on the scale of the Bauhaus—though any comparison with the Bauhaus itself is wisely avoided. Instead, Fry's fragmentary reflections on modern architecture are favorably compared to Le Corbusier's *Vers une architecture*. But it is nonsense to claim, as Mr. Reed does, that what he calls "Fry's architectural principles" should now be seen to occupy "a central place in the history of modernism." Fry said some very intelligent things about architecture, but his achievements in that field can hardly be said to extend beyond the house he designed for himself. Le Corbusier he was not.

What *A Roger Fry Reader* will remain valuable for are some of the essays that Mr. Reed has culled from the voluminous body of criticism that Fry contributed to journals and books that have not before been collected. Besides the Matisse and Picasso essays already mentioned, the outstanding examples are the Introduction to his translations of Mallarmé, the essay on "M. Larionow and the Russian Ballet," a hilarious polemic on "The Case of the Late Sir Lawrence Alma Tadema, O.M.," and "Blake and British Art." There are also a good many sharp observations buried in pieces that are otherwise no longer compelling. Too often, however, the "good" Roger Fry —Mr. Reed's nominee for posthumous postmodernist honors—turns out to be the promoter of good causes that were largely won before anyone thought of calling them "postmodernist." The "bad" Fry is the modernist critic—and the formalist critic of modernist art—whose work endures. It is a political sham, a postmodernist sham, to pretend otherwise.

There is a paragraph in Peter Stansky's *On or About December 1910* that states the traditional view of Roger Fry very clearly:

> Fry was full of energy and imagination, and through his lectures, his pen, his gift for friendship, his gift for advocacy, he was able to preach a new doctrine, to become a magnet for younger painters, to bring the interests of the English into the international arena. He was also particularly important not only for making these French painters so much better known in the Anglo-American world but for enunciating ideas about them that made it clearer than had been true before what these pictures meant—at least according to him—that made them more self-consciously part of the movement of modernism. He helped liberate painting from the tyranny of representation and gave it a power that he felt had not been seen in European painting since the Italian primitives.

This isn't all there needs to be said about Fry, to be sure, but it is a better place to start from than all of Christopher Reed's tortuous postmodernist claptrap. Unfortunately, however, much of *On or About December 1910* is itself based on something very akin to claptrap—the observation famously made by Virginia Woolf in 1924 that "on or about December 1910 human character changed." The reference was to the first Post-Impressionist exhibition that Fry organized in London that year. That exhibition did indeed contribute something important to the modification of British taste in art, but you have only to examine the denizens of Bloomsbury itself to see how little the show changed *their* character, never mind that of the entire modern world. Newcomers to the Bloomsbury literature will find a useful introduction to the period in Mr. Stansky's book, and readers already familiar with the Bloomsbury myth will find in Mr. Stansky one of its more devoted acolytes. For myself, it is the kind of book that so piously exaggerates the importance of Bloomsbury that it makes one yearn for some countervailing demystification of the entire movement. Unfortunately, Mr. Reed's postmodernist "cure" is far worse than the "disease" it purports to remedy—but I would be very surprised if his postmodernist travesty does not turn out to be a preview of the Bloomsbury that awaits us in the coming century.

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"The Repeal of Reticence"

by Roger Kimball

Now all is to be changed. . . . All the decent drapery of life is to be rudely torn off. All the super-added ideas, furnished from the wardrobe of a moral imagination, which the heart owns, and the understanding ratifies, as necessary to cover the defects of our naked shivering nature, and to raise it to dignity in our own estimation, are to be exploded as a ridiculous, absurd, and antiquated fashion.
—Edmund Burke

Oh, tell me, who first declared, who first proclaimed that man only does nasty things because he does not know his own real interests; and that if he were enlightened, if his eyes were opened to his real normal interests, man would at once cease to do nasty things, would at once become good and noble because, being enlightened and understanding his real advantage, he would see his own advantage in the good and nothing else. . . . Oh, the babe! Oh, the pure, innocent child!
—Fyodor Dostoyevsky

Early in December, *The New York Times* carried an art review about the work of the performance artist Carolee Schneemann, one of whose efforts, "Interior Scroll," consists of Ms. Schneemann slowly unraveling a text from her vagina while reading it aloud to her audience. Two days earlier, the *Times* had carried a news story about Jubal Brown, a Canadian student, whose performance art consisted in vomiting on works of art that he considered "oppressively trite and painfully banal." As of this writing, a Mondrian in the Museum of Modern Art and a Dufy in the Art Gallery of Ontario are known to have been unwillingly collaborators in this exercise of reverse peristalsis. What can one say? The extraordinary thing about these unsavory episodes is that they are no longer extraordinary. They are simply bulletins about the way we live now. For every Carolee Schneemann, there are a hundred Karen Finleys, prancing about naked on a stage somewhere, smeared in chocolate and skirling about the the evils of patriarchy and the stinginess of the National Endowment for the Arts. For every Jubal Brown, there are a hundred Andres Serranos making photographs of crucifixes in urine or Robert Mapplethorpes registering horrific scenes of sexual torture and excretory perversion for the delectation of the art world's "cutting edge." This is old news now, business as usual, more of the same. But what does *that* tell us about ourselves?

It is clear, at any rate, that the moral collapse on view in the advanced precincts of the art world is not confined to the art world. On the contrary, it is a corollary of the moral collapse suffered by society at large. We live, after all, in a world where underwear advertisements on buses are indistinguishable from mild pedophilic pornography, where pornography of the harshest, most dehumanizing variety is (for the most part) a legitimate multi-billion-dollar

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industry, catering to and exacerbating all manner of degeneration through magazines, videos, photographs, and, lately, the Internet. Couples queue up to participate in television talk shows, eager to discuss with clinical exactness the details of their sex lives, proud to demonstrate that they have nothing to hide. Radio talk shows compete for explicitness. Ditto Hollywood. Just out, for example, is a celebrated movie portraying the pornographer Larry Flynt as a hero of the First Amendment. Billboards in airports depict cheery, bow-tied phalluses sheathed in condoms and bearing the legend "What the well-dressed penis is wearing." Even grade-school children are instructed in techniques of "safe sex" lest they wander off the playground unacquainted with the use of a condom.

Of course, sex is not the only once-private matter now subjected to the glare of universal publicity. Every detail of a man's or woman's physiological existence is now ventilated with nary a blush or hesitation. Shyness, modesty, *pudeur*: we are beyond all that. If President Reagan suffers from colon polyps, it is only to be expected that the evening news will display pictures of his digestive tract with the offending bits color-coded for viewer identification.

We live, in short, at a time when nothing is too private or personal that it cannot be broadcast and dissected in public. "Intimacy" is now a public project, "private life" merely one of the things exposed in tabloids and prime-time television. How did we get in this situation? What happened that art and pathology are now so often indistinguishable? What happened that "shame," "discretion," and "reticence" are, for many, no longer regarded as virtues but as antique and eminently dispensable habits of mind? The quick answer is the 1960s. It was then that the wholesale attack on convention, the demand for sexual liberation, and the spirit of moral Prometheanism—everything that is summed up by the word "counterculture"—coalesced and achieved critical mass. Attitudes and behavior previously unthinkable outside the pages of utopian tracts or black-market pornography became first acceptable, then widespread.

But if the 1960s marked the culmination of what Thomas Sowell has called the "agenda of degeneration," that agenda has a long and complex history. Unearthing that history and examining its moral implications are the tasks that Rochelle Gurstein has undertaken in *The Repeal of Reticence: A History of America's Cultural and Legal Struggles Over Free Speech, Obscenity, Sexual Liberation, and Modern Art*.[1] Let me say straight off that this is a remarkable book: passionate, learned, and fueled by a moral intelligence that never becomes preachy or moralistic. Ms. Gurstein, who teaches at the Bard Graduate Center in New York, tells us in her acknowledgements that *The Repeal of Reticence* began life as a dissertation—directed, in part, by the historian Christopher Lasch, who died in 1994 in his early sixties. Ms. Gurstein notes that her "first debt" is to Lasch, and readers familiar with his work will detect his influence throughout *The Repeal of Reticence*: in the way Ms. Gurstein structures her argument, her use of sources, even her syntax and diction. In places, *The Repeal of Reticence* bears the unfortunate earmarks of its origins in the Ph.D. assembly line; it is repetitive, overly schematic—what Ms. Gurstein calls "the party of reticence" and "the party of exposure" seem at times like battling chess pieces—and some of the literature she discusses is more thoroughly rehearsed than digested. None of this matters much, though. For what one chiefly notices about the book is its display of dignity, maturity, and common sense. This is not academic make-work but a serious contribution to one of the most pressing intellectual discussions of our time.

Ms. Gurstein describes her basic concern as the effort "to understand how the idea of

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1 *The Repeal of Reticence: A History of America's Cultural and Legal Struggles Over Free Speech, Obscenity, Sexual Liberation, and Modern Art*, by Rochelle Gurstein; Hill and Wang, 357 pages, $27.50.

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exposure, which once had been equated with shamelessness, impudence, and impropriety, came to be celebrated as the premier agency of enlightenment and emancipation." How did it happen, she wonders, that many people, seemingly intelligent and well-informed, now find themselves paralyzed in the face of basic moral questions, unwilling or unable to distinguish between "the essential circulation of ideas, which is the cornerstone of liberal democracy, and the commercial exploitation of news, entertainment, and sex as commodities"? It was not always this way, and one of Ms. Gurstein's chief aims in this book is to "recover the origins of what was once a vital debate about what belongs in public and trace how it has degenerated into its current predictable form."

Ms. Gurstein is hardly alone in her concern about such matters. Indeed, her book taps into a reservoir of renewed feeling about manners, propriety, decorum, what is and is not fitting for display in public. In some respects, for example, Ms. Gurstein's topic overlaps with the topic of Roger Shattuck's new book, *Forbidden Knowledge: From Prometheus to Pornography*.[2] Both books are engaged in a search for moral limits in a world where limits of any kind seem at best arbitrary. Both, it is worth noting, are written from a perspective of what we might call chastened or disabused liberalism. What we have here are essentially liberal reassessments, not conservative polemics. But where Mr. Shattuck's guiding theme is the question "Are there things we should not know?" Ms. Gurstein's overriding question is "Are there things we should not show?" That is to say, her primary focus is on behavior, not knowledge. She is concerned with the health of the public sphere, "the crucial relationship between what is said or done in public and the cultural and political life of a democracy." Following the philosopher Hannah Arendt—the other major intellectual influence on her book—Ms. Gurstein finds a key to the fate of public life in the fortunes of the delicate faculties that preside over it: taste, judgment, decorum, a sense of what is fitting and what is not. If "the public sphere has degenerated into a stage for sensational displays of matters the people formerly would have considered unfit for public appearance," the primary reason is the disease or repudiation of taste—once a public trust, now increasingly a matter of subjective fancy.

On this issue, Ms. Gurstein approvingly quotes Arendt, who describes taste as the "activity . . . that decides how this world, independent of its utility and our vital interests in it, is to look and sound, what men will see and what they will hear in it." That of course was once upon a time. "In our time," Ms. Gurstein laments,

> taste has no public resonance at all; rather, it has been drastically reduced to mean little more than individual whim or consumer preference. In consequence, judgments about which things should appear in public, speculation about the common good, as well as deliberation about moral and aesthetic matters, have increasingly been relegated to the obscurity of the private realm, leaving everyone to his or her own devices.

Ms. Gurstein's brief remarks on "taste and the common world" (as she titles her Introduction) are among the most suggestive and provocative things in her book. It is a pity that she does not develop them more fully. She alludes frequently to the corruption and what we might call the privatization of taste. And she notes in passing that, with the eclipse of reticence, "the faculties of taste and judgment—along with the sense of the sacred and the shameful—have become utterly vacant." But she provides virtually no discussion of the faculties of taste and judgment themselves. In particular, she has little of substance to say about the chief matter of contention: exactly how these activities, which for many

2 *Forbidden Knowledge: From Prometheus to Pornography*, by Roger Shattuck; St. Martin's Press, 370 pages, $26.95.

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today seem almost the paradigm of subjectivity, can assume anything like an authoritative, public function.

Hints about how taste and judgment might fulfill the essentially political ambition that Ms. Gurstein alludes to are contained in Kant's *Critique of Judgment* (which, incidentally, Kant originally intended to call the *Critique of Taste*), especially in those sections where Kant describes taste as "a faculty common to all" and attempts to reconcile the unavoidable subjectivity of taste ("everyone is entitled to his own taste") with its claims to universality (we in fact depend on our judgments of taste being widely shared). "This is done," Kant suggests, through the imagination, by "putting ourselves in the place of others." We thereby leave behind our attachment to what is particular to ourselves and achieve the "enlarged mode of thought" that he believed the exercise of taste encouraged. Schiller, in his *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*, extended Kant's sketchy analysis, making it more concrete and developing it into a view of life that made taste and aesthetic experience the key to the development of man's humanity and sociability. And Hannah Arendt, in a slim volume on Kant's political philosophy that Ms. Gurstein does not mention, suggestively puts taste at the center of her discussion, showing how the exercise of taste, though seemingly the most idiosyncratic of faculties, always points beyond itself to a common world and shared meanings. Thus the paradox that, as Kant put it, "in taste egoism is overcome."

Ms. Gurstein does not enter much into details about the nature of taste. But she does provide a social history of its dissolution. In effect, her book offers a chronicle of diminution: the diminution of the public sphere from a rich field of shared meanings that exercise a legitimate claim on our affections, passions, and habits to a brutish, depopulated realm where the only recognized claim is a legal one. "It is a sign of our time," Ms. Gurstein notes, that the rejection of common-sense standards of decency and propriety in the name of "freedom of choice" "is automatically offered not only on behalf of commercial entertainment but also for obscene art and pornography; and it is offered with equal gusto by Hollywood, Broadway, and Madison Avenue as well as by postmodern academics, liberal arts administrators, 'advanced' artists, record companies, and First Amendment lawyers."

Ms. Gurstein's ambition is twofold. On the one hand, she looks back to the late nineteenth and early twentieth century in order to trace the intellectual and moral origins of the attack on propriety in the debate over such matters as birth control and sexual hygiene, realism in art and literature, and the rise of a sensationalistic, mass-circulation press that was often criticized for invading privacy for the sake of a story. In every case, she shows, "enlightened," progressive opinion carried the day—to such an extent, indeed, that "the problem of recognizing indecency has a quaint ring today, since a belief made popular by the party of exposure is that concern for indecency is nothing more than a foolish Victorian or Puritan throwback." As Ms. Gurstein observes, nowadays "the mere mention of Puritans is enough to demolish an enemy." What does it tell us that we are more afraid of being accused of being "puritanical" than condemned as immoral?

Ms. Gurstein has done a good deal of original research. Her discussion of such pivotal figures as Charles Eliot Norton (one of the quiet heroes of her book) and William Dean Howells, the Comstock Act of 1873 (which prohibited sending sexually explicit materials through the mails), and early legal battles over privacy and obscenity is deft and illuminating. She colors in the rich, often tangled historical background for the free-speech debates that, in the 1950s and 1960s, helped to transform the moral fabric of American life.

It is worth noting, for example, that until the 1950s, battles over obscenity did not centrally involve First Amendment issues as

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they inevitably do today; in fact, free speech was explicitly excluded by the courts as a defense for trafficking in obscene materials. The problem was not defining obscenity—as Ms. Gurstein notes, there was remarkable unanimity about that—but in assessing the degree of public harm the circulation of certain materials might be expected to cause. "Obscenity was successfully regulated," she notes, "because there was broad consensus about indecency, rooted in the old standards of the reticent sensibility." Gradually, however, the whole debate shifted until the startling view put forward by the social reformer Theodore Schroeder in 1911 became the norm: "All obscenity," he wrote, "is in the viewing mind, not in the book or picture." (Schroeder was clearly a man ahead of his time: "Our best scientific thinkers," he wrote with the sort of fatuous bravado of which tenured professorships are made today, "concur in the belief that morality is relative and progressive.")

The privatization of obscenity was tantamount to an admission of moral impotence. As Ms. Gurstein points out, "once discussions about obscenity become fixed exclusively on the incitement of private sexual responses and have nothing to say about the deterioration of the public sphere, the coarsening of standards of taste and judgment, or the waning of the sense of shame, the entire matter becomes weightless." Unfortunately, such weightlessness is an incitement to extremism. In the absence of any clearly recognized standards of what counts as obscene, the ante is always upped. One taboo after the another falls before the "transgressive" experiments of an amoral elite bent on "testing the limits" of so-called free speech. So it is that today, as Ms. Gurstein notes toward the end of her book,

> it is not a question of Comstock ludicrously trying to stop the Art Students' League from mailing a pamphlet with reproductions of studio nudes. Instead, it is libertarians with the full machinery of the state behind them fighting for the rights of neo-Nazis to march in Skokie, the rights of the Ku Klux Klan to burn crosses, the rights of bigots to scream racial slurs, and the rights of pornographers to their exploitative trade in women.

Liberals celebrate the introduction of First Amendment protection for obscenity as a victory for progress and freedom; "it is better understood," Ms. Gurstein observes, "as a marker of the disappearance of shared ideas about what constitutes obscenity and what constitutes art."

Obviously, Ms. Gurstein is more than a dispassionate historian, uncovering the forgotten roots of contemporary debates. She also wishes to reflect critically on their outcome. Accordingly, her second aim is to ask whether there is anything worth recovering from the earlier debates she presents in such meticulous detail, "especially from the losing side." What can we gain, for example, by comparing the debate over *Ulysses* or *Lady Chatterley's Lover* with the debate over Robert Mapplethorpe's photographs or Karen Finley's episodes of exhibitionism? Noting that "yesterday's stirring calls to arms have deteriorated into today's tired clichés," Ms. Gurstein asks whether the arguments in favor of the "avant-garde" deserve the "automatic endorsement" they currently enjoy.

The story that Ms. Gurstein tells is not only compelling but also poignant. For it is in large part a tale of the unexpected consequences of good intentions. The history of what Ms. Gurstein calls "the repeal of reticence" (her title comes from a 1914 essay by the writer Agnes Repplier) is the story of the enlightened sensibility of progressive liberalism confronting the unsavory results of the logic of unfettered emancipation. "Enthusiasts of exposure," Ms. Gurstein explains,

> extended the Enlightenment commitment of flooding light into dark places to matters previously believed to be either private or not worthy of public consideration; in the name of equality, they stretched the prospect of democracy to realms previously understood as being non-political, specifically the home and

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> the arts. And by speaking in the name of progress, they indicted privacy for blocking the light of emancipation and in so doing, successfully discredited the discourse of reticence as a language of cover-up and repression.

Alas, what was meant to free mankind from the shackles of ignorance, superstition, and prejudice wound up trivializing or besmirching the very things this new freedom was meant to salvage. "It is," Ms. Gurstein observes, "one of the bitterest of historical ironies that the means employed by modern reformers and cultural radicals to realize this cherished ideal [of intimacy] exposed it to a kind of light that violated the privacy required to nurture it, which, in turn, stripped love of its value."

In the end, the problem with progressive, reforming liberalism is not its amorality but its superficiality. Subjecting what Burke called the "decent drapery of life" to the reductive scenarios of unanchored rationalism, it is always tempted to replace the rich texture of human reality with some utopian dogma. Thus it is with privacy and intimacy. Prior to the modern age, Ms. Gurstein notes, everything connected with mankind's animal or biological life—childbirth, sickness, sex, excretion, death—was enveloped by a filigree of privacy, shame, and taboo. With the elevation of private life into the limelight of publicity—epitomized in what one historian called the "doctrine of no secrets"—all that changed. Henceforth, the only absolute taboo was the idea that there might in fact be absolute taboos. "Sophisticated moderns, breaking with the wisdom of all previous ages, typically pride themselves on their ability to live without such 'sentimental' or 'romantic' illusions. What makes the modern understanding of privacy modern is this scorn for the very idea of the sacred."

No doubt the reforming movements that Ms. Gurstein describes achieved some good. But there is an important sense in which enlightened attacks on shame and taboo mark a *retreat* from civilization. Thus it is that Ms. Gurstein argues that the

> reverence for privacy should not be simply dismissed, as it always is today, as mere Victorian prudery. Instead it should be understood as a highly elaborated form of the age-old wisdom that joins privacy, shame, and the sacred at the very deepest level of consciousness. The reticent sensibility is at one with the perspective of all societies that recognize limits to knowledge and thus approach the unknowable with awe and wonder.

Another aspect of the superficiality of the progressive liberalism chronicled in *The Repeal of Reticence* is its tendency to Pelagianism—that is, to the naïve belief that (as Ms. Gurstein puts it) "unhappiness existed not because of limitations inherent in the human condition but because of social conventions that had rigidified over time." If unhappiness is due to cumbersome and outworn conventions, why not simply dispense with the offending conventions? After all, what are social conventions but the distillate of age-old prejudice? "For the party of exposure," Ms. Gurstein notes, "once a custom or a convention was unmasked as contingent and lost its legitimacy, the way was paved for new freedoms." Unfortunately, all too often the other side of those new freedoms was a new sense of meaninglessness and emptiness. The attack on convention as "merely contingent" again betrays a rationalistic hubris. As Ms. Gurstein notes, "*all* law is rooted in the customs of a particular place and time, as it is codified in common law and in legislation." In this sense, contingency is more an argument for caution than for license: "the very contingency and therefore fragility of customs, which preserve the best common wisdom of a people thus far and give life its distinctive moral shape, make it imperative to be discerning and sympathetic even as one is critical." It is perhaps a pleasing fantasy that reason allows us to do without the accumulated wisdom and prohibitions of our ancestors, but it is a fantasy nonetheless. As Agnes Repplier wisely observed, "If knowledge alone could save us from sin, the salvation of the world would be easy work."

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Jefferson on race & revolution

by Hadley Arkes

Edmund Burke remarked famously—and often—on those men, seized with grand theories, who busied themselves making, unmaking, and remaking the French Revolution. They were counting, he said, on "bungling practice [to correct] absurd theory." For Burke, the sweeping proclamations on "the Rights of Man" were belied by a spirit of lawlessness; a passion to resist authority running so deep that it would finally detach itself from all manner of moral and legal restraints. But for Thomas Jefferson, viewing France from afar—delivered from the embassy in Paris, installed now as secretary of state in the administration of George Washington—the same record of mayhem did not produce the same impressions or inspire the same judgments. The French Revolution would lurch from confiscation to murderous violence, and yet nothing in this record would mar, for Jefferson, the beauty of the idea itself. The idea was, of course, "liberty." What was unfolding in France was the natural fulfillment of the American Revolution; it was the first dramatic confirmation that the rights proclaimed in America were universal in their reach.

In advancing that same project, the French were now expanding, as Jefferson said, that holy land of liberty. The king, queen, and the national assembly were being chased out of Paris, and yet Jefferson could write to Thomas Paine that "the mobs and murders under which they dress this fact are like the rags in which religion robes the true god." However unlovely the French Revolution might appear, Jefferson would look through the sordidness and persistently find there the "true god."

Jefferson had been succeeded in the embassy in Paris by his protégé, William Short, but he quickly imposed the most benign filter on the dispatches that Short sent from France. Short had arrived with sympathy for the French Revolution, but his reports were sober, realistic, unclouded with illusions. In August 1792, he recounted "[a]rrestations without number of all descriptions of persons suspected of attachment to the late constitution, and the people of Paris menacing the assembly to immolate these victims without delay."

A month later, Short's successor, Gouverneur Morris, reported from Paris that there had been a week of "uncheck'd Murders in which some thousands have perished":

> It began with between two and three hundred of the Clergy who had been shut up because they would not take the Oaths prescrib'd by Law, and which they said was contrary to their Conscience. . . . All those who were confin'd either on the Accusation or Suspicion of Crimes were destroy'd. Madame de Lamballe was (I believe) the only Woman kill'd, and she was beheaded and embowelled, the Head and Entrails were paraded on pikes thro the Street and the Body dragged after them.

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In the face of these reports, Jefferson was not instructed by the news but irritated with the messengers. In a revealing letter to Short in January 1793, Jefferson wrote that "the liberty of the whole earth was depending on the issue of the contest, and was ever such a prize won with so little innocent blood?":

> My own affections have been deeply wounded by some of the martyrs to this cause, but rather than it should have failed, I would have seen half the earth desolated. Were there but an Adam and an Eve left in every country, and left free, it would be better than as it now is.

Conor Cruise O'Brien takes this passage as the centerpiece, or the linchpin, of his new book on Thomas Jefferson and the French Revolution.[1] As O'Brien shows, passages of this kind have been discreetly underplayed by the historians; they have been concealed in paraphrase or hidden in ellipses. Writers like Dumas Malone seemed determined to protect Jefferson, or preserve the "real" Jefferson—by which they meant the "liberal" Jefferson—and they could do that by putting his dark side out of view. In this way, the Jefferson who took a posture of detachment in the face of genocide could still be venerated as the leader of the Party of Humane Sentiments. But if Jefferson had not been flying into hyperbole; if his words had been seriously measured; then it would not be such a stretch to suggest, with O'Brien, that Jefferson had contrived the kind of apparatus of justification that would have covered, in our own time, the butcheries of Pol Pot.

O'Brien is determined, in any event, to bring the real Jefferson out of the shadow, and to disrupt the hagiography. The result, at first, is an account that is interesting, but reassuringly familiar: Jefferson emerges as a man of the Left, simply in advance of his time. He seems to be the progenitor of those pilgrims who would journey to the Soviet Union or North Vietnam, and with an exertion of genius, screen out the things that were disagreeable and see what they wished to see. But as O'Brien completes his design, as he nears his end, he produces turns that are indeed quite striking and novel. And then, as though to surpass even himself, he launches into an epilogue on the American "civil religion." But there, his genius, or his flair for insight, finally devours itself, and he reaches a plane of nearly sublime perversity.

Along the way, as I say, O'Brien manages to see many things rightly, in part because he brings to his reading of the letters and documents the eye of a man seasoned in politics. In that vein, O'Brien quickly grasps that the French Revolution took on a deeper resonance for Jefferson precisely because it played back into American politics. In upholding the idea of liberty, the French were securing liberty in America itself: the American current, running abroad, confirmed the republican idea in the United States. In the reckoning of Jefferson, it strengthened the hands of the "republicans" in America against their adversaries, with their lingering respect for things "aristocratical." It was Jeffeson's profound conceit, of course, that he and his friends, sprung from a class of plantation owners, sustained by an economy of slavery, were the true bearers of the republican idea.

But Jefferson's tie to slavery had to impair his credentials as a champion of "government by consent," and as O'Brien shrewdly recognized, the French Revolution now offered him a grand device of compensation. The support of the French Revolution could become the test of the purer, unalloyed form of republican government. With attention fixed in that way, Jefferson could soar well above his own complicity in a regime of slavery—and well past the vexing fact that the supposed enemies of republican government, Alexander Hamilton and John Adams, were the most sincere opponents of slavery.

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1 *The Long Affair: Thomas Jefferson and the French Revolution, 1785–1800*, by Conor Cruise O'Brien; University of Chicago Press, 385 pages, $29.95.

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Jefferson would use the new moment, offered by the French Revolution, as a surge of renewal for America. It would be a lever for removing the corruption represented by Hamilton and Adams and securing republican government. O'Brien makes the connection as he moves to the end of his book: "Washed in the blood of the victims of the French Revolution . . . humanity is born again. Above all, America, and even higher above all, Virginia is born again, washed clean at last from that deep blurred single stain, composed of blackness and of guilt." For this would now be republican government *without the strain of principle that* was immanent, in America, through the flaw of slavery and the enduring, troubling presence of black people.

Jefferson had said, in that letter to Short, that "were there but an Adam and Eve left in every country, and left free, it would be better than it now is." O'Brien poses the apt question, "What color are the American Adam and Eve?" To that question, as O'Brien says, "there can only be one answer. . . . Adam and Eve have to be white, because Adam and Eve are *free*." In the world of Thomas Jefferson, the equality of free people was an equality that flowed to white men. As soon as black people were free, they would be banished from any land that contained Jefferson. In November 1776, Jefferson was chosen for a committee to modernize and codify the statutes of Virginia, and part of his own work was to draft the statutes bearing on slaves and free blacks. In the additions made by Jefferson, it was illegal for free blacks to enter Virginia of their own accord, or for former slaves to remain there for more than a year after they had been emancipated. White women who bore the children of blacks would also be required to leave the state within a year. Anyone who violated these regulations would be placed "out of the protection of the laws"—which is to say, they could be reenslaved or killed without the restraint of the law.

The attachment to France would gradually lose its political value to Jefferson as France and the United States fell into the famous "quasi-war," and the French Revolution came to an end with Napoleon's coup d'etat in December 1799. But the romance of the Revolution for Jefferson came decisively to an end with the incident that touched even closer to home, with the issue of blacks and Virginia. The Revolution in Paris for the Rights of Man had inspired a slave revolt in Saint-Domingue, led by the redoubtable Toussaint-Louverture. While France was at war with England, the British fleet blocked access to the Caribbean, and the French could not deploy a force of any *consequence to put down the rebellion. But* when Bonaparte made peace with Britain, the sea-lanes were cleared. He could move decisively then to regain this prize of the French colonies.

By that time, Jefferson was president, and a black republic in Saint-Domingue was already setting off tremors in the American South. In an encounter that seems to have been omitted from most textbooks, Jefferson met with the French charge d'affairs, Louis A. Pichon, and suggested, in so many words, that Napoleon would render a useful service to the United States if he would rid them of this black republic. Ironically, Hamilton and Adams, those "heresiarchs," had favored the independence of this nascent republic. The Federalists had sought to sustain Saint-Domingue with trade and with a certain help in resisting the French. But according to Pichon, Jefferson suggested that if Bonaparte could first make peace with England "then nothing will be easier than to furnish your army and fleet with everything, and to reduce Toussaint to starvation."[2]

Where, in all of this, was the Jefferson of the Declaration of Independence, or the

2 This infamous dealing over Saint-Domingue—which ended in an orgy of killing and sadism—is one of the most neglected stories on Jefferson. It is treated more fully in Roger G. Kennedy's *Orders from France: The Americans and the French in a Revolutionary World, 1780–1820* (Knopf, 1989).

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writer who professed to "tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just, that his justice cannot sleep forever"? As O'Brien recalls, those sentiments were not out of order in Virginia in the eighteenth century, for not even white Southerners would defend the rightness of slavery. That was especially the case if they traveled, as Jefferson did, in more "national" or cosmopolitan circles. But even at the time, Southerners knew that nothing in these sentiments would induce Jefferson to do anything practical to impair, or destroy, the system that sustained him along with everyone else. In fact, as O'Brien notes, Jefferson was relentless in tracking down his own fugitive slaves, and severe—even gratuitously harsh—in administering punishment to runaways. When it came to the matter of free blacks, Jefferson seemed utterly persuaded that the only tenable solution would require the colonization of blacks, or their shipment out of the country.

In sum, Jefferson reflected the most sober doubts about the prospects of blacks and whites living together in anything resembling a common polity. And as O'Brien suggests, that may explain the paradox of Jefferson's reputation in the South: he was unpopular in the period just before the Civil War, but he became a grand, venerated figure in the aftermath. Before the war, he was seen as the writer who had rather overdone it with egalitarian prose, calling slavery into question at its root. But after the war, he was the figure who had set forth, in a legal scheme, a stringent policy for dealing with free blacks. The Jefferson Memorial in Washington has, inscribed on the wall, a line from Jefferson's *Autobiography*: "Nothing is more certainly written in the book of fate than that these people [the black slaves] are to be free." But as O'Brien reminds us, the tablet does not contain the next sentence: "Nor is it less certain that the two races, equally free, cannot live in the same government."

In O'Brien's reading, it is no wonder that Jefferson became the patron saint of the segregationists and states' righters in the 1950s and 1960s. He suggests, in a further leap of interpretation, that Jefferson may become again the inspiration of right-wing racists and the militiamen in the 1990s. O'Brien had noted earlier that Jefferson had projected onto his political adversaries his own vices and mistakes. And now O'Brien seems to have taken Jefferson's technique as his own. The "racism" he fixes on Jefferson he now projects onto conservatives in America; and in this manner he uses Jefferson as a device for defaming what he calls the "right wing" in American politics.

O'Brien makes his way to that inventive point through the Declaration of Independence. If there is an American "civic religion," O'Brien understands that the Declaration stands at its center, and the Declaration, he is persuaded, was false at its core. "It is accepted," he announces, "that the words 'all men are created equal' do not, in their literal meaning, apply to women, and were not intended by the Founding Fathers . . . to apply to slaves." But Lincoln did think that the central "proposition" of the Declaration applied to women, and in the argument over women's suffrage, it did not require, as O'Brien claims, any change in "the meaning of the formula, to include women." Yet, putting that matter to the side, O'Brien asserts quite flatly that "the sublime principles of the Declaration did not apply to [blacks]. They are for whites only."

With a ring of surety—and with the cover of liberal outrage—O'Brien has simply backed himself into the same understanding announced by Chief Justice Taney in the Dred Scott case. In that decision in 1857, the Court had indirectly "nationalized" slavery; it declared that people could not be dispossessed of their property in slaves when they entered the territories of the United States. In the course of his opinion for the Court, Taney insisted that the Declaration of Independence was never meant to cover blacks. When the drafters declared that "all men are created equal," they really meant, in this construal, "all white men." And as

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Taney explained, the same understanding, carried over into the Constitution, meant that black people literally had no rights that white people were obliged to respect.

But rather than expressing the understanding "accepted" at the time, Taney set off a political firestorm, for he put forth what Lincoln regarded as a heresy—as nothing less than moral treason. Indeed, it was Lincoln's argument that, until Taney announced this insight of his, no American leader had dared to propound such a teaching in public. Jefferson had ample reason for his guilt and equivocation, for he knew that the doctrine of the Declaration, as an abstract doctrine and as a moral axiom, did indeed encompass blacks as well as whites. Jefferson's mixed record was well known to Lincoln when he said,

> All honor to Jefferson—to the man who, in the concrete pressure of a struggle for national independence by a single people had the coolness, forecast, and capacity to introduce into a merely revolutionary document, an abstract truth, . . . and in all coming days, it shall be a rebuke and a stumbling block to the very harbingers of re-appearing tyranny and oppression.

With his large nature, and imaginative reach, it is curious that O'Brien was never drawn to the possibility of St. Paul as another explanation of Jefferson: "In my inmost self I delight in the law of God, but I perceive that there is in my bodily members a different law, fighting against the law that my reason approves." Jefferson could be an infirm instrument for the principles of the Declaration, but nothing in his infirmity would impair the principles themselves. And yet, it is O'Brien's inclination to condemn both Jefferson and the teaching of the Declaration. Since the Declaration, in his reading, could not have been meant to encompass all men, black as well as white, it was simply a utopian manifesto that would have, as its principal effect, the toppling of established governments and the unraveling of law. Jefferson was, then, "a spellbinding and anarchic racist prophet." Years later, one of the suspects in the Oklahoma bombing would be arraigned in a T-shirt bearing Jefferson's line, "The tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots and tyrants." The connection, for O'Brien, was clinching: "Jefferson is far more suitable as a patron saint of white supremacists than of modern American liberals." He had to be seen, finally, "as prophet and patron of the fanatical racist far right in America."

But the militiamen, and the fanatical racists, are no more a plausible part of the political Right in America than the Weathermen were a part of the Democratic Left. There is, in fact, no racist party in America, but O'Brien uses the kind of language that subtly identifies the militiamen with the likes of Dick Armey and Ralph Reed. This man with a practiced eye turns that eye to America, and yet he cannot see rightly. But perhaps he misreads the political landscape in America because he misunderstands America at the center of things: he sees America weirdly, because he reads the Declaration of Independence in the style of Chief Justice Taney. Or rather, he takes the founding idea of America, the notion of "natural rights," and sees it, in the style of Burke, as "the wild gas of liberty."

And yet, O'Brien himself recorded an encounter with a "Negro chief," a leader of the revolt among the slaves in Saint-Domingue, who questioned his French captors: "Have you forgotten that you have formally sworn to the Declaration of Rights . . . which says that men are born free and equal?" Did O'Brien regard that outrage as misplaced, that argument as empty? This man was not invoking, after all, the rights of a Frenchman. His argument made sense only if we take seriously the notion that the rights mentioned in the Declaration of Independence were indeed universal in their reach; that, as Lincoln understood, those rights sprung from the nature of human beings, and they would hold true in all places where human nature remained the same.

O'Brien makes it clear that he was willing

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to interrupt the production of this book in order to incorporate late-breaking news, in the spring of 1996, about the accused bombers in Oklahoma. But in a book so arranged, so open to recent events that bear on its main argument, it is all the stranger that there is no mention of the most dramatic event over the past year that bore on relations between whites and blacks in America. There was not even a passing reference in this book to the O.J. Simpson case. And yet, there has been nothing remotely like that case in showing a refusal of blacks to convict a black man who has killed whites. No recent case, then, has posed a sharper question of the willingness of black people to protect the lives of their fellow citizens who are white. But to sense what was deeply disturbing in that case was to remind ourselves of the pessimism borne by Jefferson about the prospect of blacks and whites sharing the same polity, and doing justice to one another. Jefferson's doubts on that point were hardly novel or racist. Lincoln shared the same sober doubts—and so, too, did Shakespeare (as the late Allan Bloom reminded us with his essays on *Othello* and *The Merchant of Venice*). Even politicians seeking the most humane ends could encompass, in their understanding, the sense of a tragic, intractable problem. Yet, there is no concession to that problem in O'Brien—and no disposition even to take notice of the most striking, recent events that may throw out of kilter the political fable he is weaving.

In short, O'Brien manages to erect filters quite as formidable as the filters he attributes to Jefferson. In fact, in the most subtle inversion produced by a writer, O'Brien seems to have absorbed in himself the vices he attributes to Jefferson: the racism he finds in Jefferson he projects onto the political Right, and by implication, then, onto conservatives in America. The racist reading of the Declaration of Independence he incorporates as his own, and through that lens he now offers his commentary on American politics. He would supplant the Declaration of Independence in favor of principles more suited to "multiracialism," which may be another way of saying the age of "multiculturalism." In this way, he makes the attack on Jefferson part of the attack of the Left on America. O'Brien is no apologist for genocide, but by the end, he has as many things slightly off, or turned about, as Jefferson had. And one could fairly wonder now of O'Brien, as one could wonder of Jefferson, whether he can look out on politics, in America or abroad, and see what is plainly before him.

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Poems
by Stephen Stepanchev, Rachel Hadas, Peter Schmitt & Phillis Levin

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Leaving Sarajevo

The rocky road climbs the mountain
Past a hut where a black lamb
Shivers in the snow
And a grey falcon broods in a tree.

I ride on high, over the piebald,
In my creaking cart.
It has a broken wheel
And shakes my brother's coffin.

A flight of black birds
Drops from the sky
Onto a field of snow
And makes a field of black birds.

Two boys slouch beside a sign
Advertising plum brandy.
They spit and pelt me with stones
As I pass by with my brother's coffin.

I ride on high, over the piebald,
In my creaking cart,
Melting—and my brother melting—
In the rotten snow.

—Stephen Stepanchev

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On that mountain

Evidence everywhere: accumulation.
Leaves atremble and narratives of branches
ramifying, so ever more connections
stay unfinished nor ever to be finished.
Do we not all have separate destinations?
Not that it matters. Aching opalescence
held us all spellbound, motionless, atingle,
balanced like sun and rain before a rainbow,
thunder purring and lightning white as daylight.
After the storm passed, all the world was gleaming,
glossy, almost lubricious with potential,
each blade of grass a dagger in the morning,
each leaf a goblet, brimming, winking, ready
to repay some small measure of night's thunder.
Couples stood tiptoe, trembling at departure,
kissing, breathing *Oh, let me touch your wisdom;*
let me then taste reciprocally your beauty.
More than mere iridescence—transformation.
Recall the dark face, thunder cowled at midnight.
Recall the bright face, rinsed clean for separation
as we're making our several preparations,
so many roads diverging in the greenwood,
putting on the inevitable blinders—
I must keep to my path and my path only—
closing our ears to thunder and cicadas,
closing our eyes to all those trembling branches,
meekly turning our backs on opalescence,
on the jewels of potential transformation,
getting ready to go back down the mountain.

—*Rachel Hadas*

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Renewing the vows

My father, who will be dead in seven months,
and my mother are renewing their vows

in the nineteenth-century New England church
they married in, thirty-eight Octobers back.

The few of our small family are there,
my brother, my father's sister, her friend,

a couple of cousins. My mother, smiling
almost shyly, it seems, has yet to take

her eyes off my father, who stands there trembling
a little, partly from the tumor, partly

from emotion which the tumor's location
has only exacerbated these days.

I would like my father to return
my mother's gaze, but he is staring off

in another direction, his shoulders
perceptibly shaking, past the minister,

past the altar, as if he doesn't have to
look at my mother to know that she is there,

and will be there. Even as he speaks his part
his eyes are somewhere else, some far corner,

and he is waiting there until, at last,
her hand reaches his for the final passage

of the ceremony, before the book
closes and there are no more words to repeat.

—*Peter Schmitt*

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Cumulus

They, too, labor,
And if we envy them we should remember
How brief their stay in the ether is.

Unfolding without reason, like forgiveness,
Or summoning
Themselves at the wind's bidding, they flee.

We do not know where they go, we go
As carelessly, as helplessly, finally
Too full of time.

But we are true
To ourselves so rarely, while they are always
Open to darkness, squandering light.

Without them, the bottomless sea seems shallow,
One more surface
Restoring itself in the mirror.

A floating prison, a dream-balloon,
The setting sun's chameleon, or the sliding
Screen of the moon—

When nothing else
Contains us we turn to them, and all
We ever gather appears less tangible.

—Phillis Levin

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Theater

Death by subtext

by Mark Steyn

Here's a postscript to last month's review of *Chicago*—or anyway something that's been bothering me. In Bob Fosse's justice-as-vaudeville, everyone's a sleazy, chiselin' lowlife: Roxie, the merry murderess; Velma, her cellmate; Billy Flynn, their shameless attorney; the prison matron . . . The one exception, the only nice guy in sight, is Roxie's innocent dupe of a husband, Amos—or, as Flynn absentmindedly keeps calling him, "Andy." Amos has only one song, a pastiche of Bert Williams's "Nobody" called "Mister Cellophane":

> . . . 'cos you can look right through me
> Walk right by me
> And never know I'm there.

At the end, when Amos asks for his exit music, the conductor doesn't hear, and so he trudges off unaccompanied. The whatsis-name who played Amos in the original production back in the Seventies did his job so well that, in the last ten minutes, I've gone over to the bookcase four times to look his name up and each time I've forgotten it by the time I've got back to my desk. To give the man his due, it was Barney Martin, a wonderfully woeful, shambling hulk of an actor. But my point is this: in the new production, his place has been taken by Joel Grey, about a twentieth of the size but a much bigger name on the marquee, and, even though he still only has a couple of tiny scenes in Act One and his plaintive solo in Act Two, it's clear that the audience adores him more than anyone else on stage. As I mentioned last month, Ann Reinking and Bebe Neuwirth are technically expert, but they're not enthralling in the way their predecessors were: Gwen Verdon and Chita Rivera used their star power to seduce you into going along with them (as far as I can tell, that's also O.J.'s strategy in his civil case). Reinking and Neuwirth can't really do that: sure, they're hard, they're amoral, but, in the end, you couldn't care whether they fry or not.

This poses a problem for a drama whose theme is the irresistible seductiveness of sleaze. James Naughton comes on like a star—hands splayed like Jolson, buh-buh-buh-booing like Bing—but the audience refuses to accord him star status. That's because, unfortunately for him and the play, there's a real star lurking among the supporting players. I don't believe Fosse would ever have cast Joel Grey in this role: he'd have foreseen the unbalancing effect, and he'd have despised it. When Barney Martin sang "Cellophane," the nobody was gingerly stepping into the spotlight and had to work for our attention; when Joel Grey sings it, it's the star turn we've been waiting for—even if he is sloughing off a trivial supporting role. Grey is a sweet man, and a star-starved audience treasures that sweetness. The producers, I'm sure, knew that, and so, even in a show that advertises itself as the ultimate in hard, cold cynicism, they de-

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cided to play to our sentimentality. This plumbs new depths in the cynicism of the Broadway musical: they're even prepared to be cynical about cynicism.

A performance by a star is not the same as a star performance. But these days the latter is so rare that, even when it does turn up, it has to struggle to get a hearing. In 1995, I reviewed the Williamstown Theatre Festival revival of Noel Coward's *Present Laughter*—a production which never got out of the starting gate. Garry Essendine, a West End matinee idol, is perhaps the biggest role Coward ever wrote for himself, and maybe the closest to home: "Every play you appear in is exactly the same, superficial, frivolous and without the slightest intellectual significance," bemoans a young idealist. "All you do with your talent is wear dressing gowns and make witty remarks when you might be really helping people, making them think! Making them feel!" But, as played by Coward in 1939, even as he insisted on the emptiness of his charm, the audience loved him for it. This is the trick *Chicago* strives for and never quite pulls off: Coward revealed his utter phoniness, and audiences were enchanted by it.

At Williamstown, I noted that, whereas the play was a justification of charm, the production was a demolition of it. It now seems that this is a recurring indignity the piece is doomed to suffer. For Coward, charm was a refuge; his latter-day interpreters, denied that option (for charm is a lost art), seem determined to take it out on the old boy himself. So, at the Walter Kerr, Scott Elliott's production gives us Frank Langella as Essendine. Langella is a big man with a big presence; he prowls the stage, confident and declamatory; he looks like an old-time matinee idol: he can wear a dressing gown without descending into a camp Coward impersonator. True, he's prone to hamminess, but that's an advantage when you're playing a character who can't resist the most absurd self-dramatizing: "This, to date, is the most irritating morning of my life," he declares, after some minor inconveniences. Langella's is a star performance—or as near as we're allowed to one these days. And yet everything else around him keeps getting in the way. I mentioned last time one of my favorite Coward exchanges, an accumulation of banalities as Essendine and Joanna, the wife of his manager, chitchat about a Toscanini concert at the Queen's Hall. The more idiotic the observations, the more erotic the charge between them, until finally: "I won't hear a word against the Albert Hall," murmurs Garry, his mouth on hers, and the act ends. The moment is a test of whoever plays Essendine's charm: as Coward knew well, you can't fake it. At Williamstown, they chickened out and cut the lines. But that's preferable to Scott Elliott's approach. He has Caroline Seymour, as Joanna, straddle Langella and play the entire exchange with her bare back to us as she (there is no other word) *humps* him.

That's the Elliott approach in one ball-crushing nutshell: he screws Essendine, he screws the play, he screws Coward. And, though it would be difficult to misconstrue a moment more than that, Elliott manages it. In counterpoint to the Cowardesque Essendine, the author gives us a grimly earnest young dramatist called Roland Maule who turns up with a play for the actor: "I know you only play rather trashy stuff as a rule, and I thought you just might like to have a shot at something deeper," he tells Essendine. In *Present Laughter*, Coward, more than usual, indulges a weakness for pointed names: Essendine sounds like a soothing lotion—the essence of charm; Maule, on the other hand, comes from Uckfield. First, Maule mauls Essendine and then, charmed by him, Roland rolls over.

In *Present Laughter*, Essendine is promiscuous with his charm, to his ex-wife, admirers, sycophants, and the whole extended family. "The gentleman's in the office and the lady's in the spare room if you want either of them," the valet announces with a curled lip. Ah-ha! For Scott Elliott, this was too much to resist. Elliott is New York's latest theatrical wunderkind and, like all good wunderkinder, he's decided that he'll

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be liberating Coward from the repressive mores of his time by bringing out the play's homosexual subtext. They teach these guys homosexual subtext in Wunderkind 101; indeed, it's beginning to look as if it's all they teach them. So, when Essendine alludes to an admiral's son with "vast strapping shoulders and tiny *tiny* hips like a wasp," Elliott thinks this is a coded reference to Coward's own homosexuality.

What utter tosh. For one thing, it's not coded: it's teasing and flirty. For another, Elliott fails, as so many do today, to understand the difference between a man who is sexually attracted to other men and the contemporary "gay" identity, which is a full-time occupation—non-stop, round-the-clock, all gay, all the time. Had he lived, Coward would never have been a modern gay: he couldn't have spared the time; he would have been too busy servicing his own unique persona to embrace anything as drearily homogenized as a group identity. As John O'Sullivan pointed out in *The New Criterion* (September 1996), late in life Coward went to Fire Island and was revolted by what he saw. But his position had been consistent throughout: in the Twenties, on the boat back from America, he'd sat down Cecil Beaton and explained to him why he shouldn't *look* queer; it was too limiting. Coward wouldn't have been marching down Fifth Avenue; he would have disdained inclusion in the "Gay and Lesbian Studies" section at Barnes and Noble. In posthumously outing the play, Elliott is, in fact, "in-ing" Coward—trapping him in a metaphorical closet, confining him to a world whose boundaries are set by the comparatively trivial detail of who he happened to be physically attracted to.

In the original production, Joanna was played by a young actress called Judy Campbell, who was in love with Coward and naïve enough to live in hope. One night, in a draughty Scottish theater, shivering their way through that seduction scene, he slipped his hand under her gown and placed it on her naked breast. "At last!" she sighed. Afterwards, he told her, "Thank you, Judy dear. That's the first time my hands have been warm all evening." Faced with a director as willfully blind to the piece as Elliott, I think Coward would have arranged to be caught in full-scale flagrante with his leading lady—just to make the point to Elliott: my penis is not me. One could argue, too, that, just as the Jews universalized their own culture through American popular song and comedy, so Coward used show business to universalize homosexual culture, making camp flamboyance hugely popular—not just with gays but with everybody; establishing "Dahling!" as a standard conversational greeting—not just for sweethearts but for casual acquaintances of either sex; enabling remarks like that one about the tiny waist to pass almost unnoticed.

I don't know why it's so hard for Elliott to understand: after all, it's in the text. Essendine explains his view of sex thus: "To me the whole business is vastly overrated. I enjoy it for what it's worth and fully intend to go on doing it for as long as anybody's interested and when the time comes that they're not I shall be perfectly content to settle down with an apple and a good book." Instead, Elliot tacks on "Mad About the Boy," written over a decade earlier, as walk-out music and even prints the lyric in the *Playbill*, as if it's the key to his entire *oeuvre*. It's not just that this is wrong, or weirdly obsessive, but that it's so boringly clapped out. It might have seemed an amusing novelty twenty years ago, but surely not today, when even Coward biographers are beginning to put the gayness in perspective—his most recent, Philip Hoare, contending that Coward had a lifelong "revulsion against penetrative sex."

But, undeterred, Elliott lumbers on seeking sex in every nook and cranny, until finally he delivers his concept's crowing *coup de théâtre*: Roland Maule, played here by Tim Hopper, throws off his overcoat, is revealed to be fully naked, and plants a huge smacker on Frank Langella's Essendine. For Elliott, it is the moment when his uninterest in the manners of time and place—Lon-

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don, 1939—becomes explicit. And, for Coward, it is the ultimate indignity: a playwright who glitters with verbal wit has been mugged by a director with his brains in his crotch.

But there's another reason why Coward would have despised this directorial conceit: like Fosse with Joel Grey's Amos, he would have thought it unfair to the star and the play. In a way, Coward wrote the character of Roland Maule to test himself: Maule is a potential scene-stealer, and the trick for both actors and director is to hold the two characters in balance. Coward's godson, Daniel Massey, told me a few months back that, in the original production, some flattering notices had gone to the head of the actor playing Maule and tipped the performance into excess. "Jimmy, this has got to stop," Coward warned him. "It's too much, it's over the top, the play is losing tempo. Tomorrow night, if you do it, I will come on and kill every single laugh that you have except two, because there are two I can't do anything about." The next night, the actor carried on as usual. Coward, ruthlessly, and using only his own feed lines and his brilliant, technical understanding of structure, killed Maule's performance stone dead—as he promised, every laugh but two. *Present Laughter* is not about the supporting cast—nude or otherwise. Elliott's various interpolations, which include casting the cabaret singer Steve Ross as Essendine's manservant and then having him tinkle period songs by *other composers* during the play, all detract from Langella's star power and damage the work's dramatic arc.

The truth is there isn't much point in wasting time digging for subtext. Even more than the rest of his work, this play is about the pleasures of living on the surface, the delights of the act:

> ROLAND: After all, there's no valid reason is there why I shouldn't be acting mad just as you're acting being sane.
> GARRY: I am not acting.
> ROLAND: You are always acting. . . I am always acting too. I have been acting mad with you because it amuses me to see you put on a surprised face. I am absolutely devoted to your face in every mood.
> GARRY: I suppose you wouldn't like to act getting the hell out of here, would you?

That, I suspect, would be Coward's attitude to Elliott. Roland Maule is a would-be theatrical who refuses to take Essendine for what he is and assumes he knows better than Essendine what he ought really to be doing. That's precisely the mistake Elliott's made in his staging of the play: I'm surprised this self-indulgent, monumentally egocentric revival was approved by the Coward Estate; in their position, I'd have it closed down.

On the subject of plays about acting, the Roundabout Theatre Company has revived Jean Anouilh's *The Rehearsal* in a new translation by Jeremy Sams, though Sams has been unable to improve the obvious title, which doesn't fully convey the force of the original French—*La Répétition*. In this *comédie brillante* from 1950, Anouilh's sidekick is Marivaux, whose play *La Double Inconstance* is being rehearsed for a country house party. Thus, 1950 and the eighteenth century are present side by side and, as in *Kiss Me, Kate*, the play-within-the-play mirrors the surrounding events. As befits his position, the Count—Tiger—has both a countess, Eliane, and a mistress, Hortensia. But he is besotted with a young slip of a governess, Lucile, and to that end he has cast her in his amateur production of *La Double Inconstance*, a pastoral idyll in which he will play the prince and she will play the shepherdess whom he loves. As his motives become clear, the rest of the party are aghast: both wife and mistress agree that his love for this girl is graceless and, for them, humiliating. With his best friend, they conspire to destroy the young girl and her love for him, and to deny him a second chance to recover the innocence of youth. In the end, sophisticated snobbish prejudice triumphs. As Anouilh saw it, contemporary French society, nominally more democratic

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and relaxed about marital infidelities, is, in fact, more inflexible than its eighteenth century forebears: unlike Marivaux's audiences, it has lost that unselfconscious simple faith that permitted it to accept a prince marrying a shepherdess. Romance is an affront to its sense of elegance and worldliness.

One of Anouilh's themes here is the question of whether a twentieth-century audience is still capable of responding to a tradition apparently foreign to its own: the Count, as a kind of upscale summer-stock Scott Elliott, frets about the Louis Quinze costumes—"so kitsch"—and briefly considers updating the play to this century. For this unattractive, self-obsessed elite, the theater is a diversion—a means of mitigating the boredom of a superficially glamorous lifestyle. Sitting among the fidgety audience at the Criterion Center, you're struck by a telling difference between 1950s France and 1990s New York: today, theater *is* the boredom of a superficially glamorous lifestyle. Clearly, most theatergoers feel there are vaguely sound reasons for continuing to attend, but most of them weren't having a very good time: they were, as Cole Porter might have put it, fighting bravely the old Anouilh.

There are reasons for this. Jeremy Sams is also the translator of Cocteau's *Les Parents terribles*, seen last year on Broadway, and I suppose the company figured that one French translation was much like another: the fact that Anouilh's admiration for the way purity and innocence can wreak havoc on civilized cynicism is the very opposite of Cocteau and that, in any event, this is hardly a line likely to commend itself to New York audiences doesn't seem to have occurred to anyone—perhaps not even to Sams, whose translation lurches periodically into the most un-Anouilh-like English tweeness. But, even granted lapses in translation, Nicholas Martin seems for most of the time to be staging some other play entirely: they're certainly rehearsing Marivaux; whether they're playing Anouilh is another matter. As Tiger, David Threlfall has a problem: a Mancunian by birth, he has many qualities, but he can't do aristocratic ease. When he tries to be posh, it comes out anguished: he sounds like one of those born-again doubters of the Church of England bishops' bench, endlessly agonizing. He is no tiger, and my understanding of the French text is that Anouilh means the name pretty literally. Playing opposite, as his best friend, is Roger Rees: his name is Hero but, next to Tiger, he's more like Tigger—bouncing, pouting, and declaiming across the floor. Rees, in this as in *Les Parents terribles*, has developed an all-purpose strategy for his various alcoholic loser Frenchmen: he flounces across the stage swinging his hips and thrusting his pelvis, like a naughty boy using his penis for a swordfight with an imaginary friend. As conventional "stage drunk" interpretations go, it's a breakthrough: Rees seems to be trying to be both Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis in one body. But the point of it all is harder to discern.

There is, inevitably, a homosexual subtext, but, with Threlfall's Anglican agonizing setting the tone, Rees seems more like an exhibitionist choirboy with an eye on the casting couch. In fact, by now, instead of a French country house party, the company's beginning to take on the air of the common room at a minor English public school: Francis Conroy as the countess enters loud and gets louder, presumably in order to be heard over Rees's flouncing; her lover, Frederick Weller, stomps about like an angry gym teacher . . . Only Anna Gunn, as Lucile, strikes the right note of awkward shyness, though whether that's because she understands her character or due to general embarrassment at what's going on around her is hard to say.

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Art

Matisse in Manhattan

by Karen Wilkin

Imagine that you are a curator who has been asked to put together an exhibition of Matisse's drawings—a delightful project and one that you might think would be hard to carry out badly. A show made up entirely of Matisse's canonical masterpieces in pen and ink or charcoal would not only be easy to select, but virtually foolproof—if you could get the loans, which is another matter. Even if you were forced to rely on only the most readily available of this master draughtsman's efforts, it would be difficult to organize a Matisse drawing show that didn't include at least *some* perfectly wonderful things.

Then imagine another kind of exhibition, one made up of a few deservedly celebrated, textbook examples, mixed with unfamiliar versions of typical motifs, little-known studies for well-known paintings, and more or less unknown drawings, all of equal or even higher quality than the famous ones. You might reject this third alternative as too difficult, since it would involve tracking down hard to locate works, winning the confidence of their owners, prying loose seldom-seen drawings from lovingly guarded private collections, and all the rest of those challenging activities that demand that curators combine expertise in art history with the abilities of bloodhounds, diplomats, and therapists. Yet it would be worth the effort. The result would be truly exciting: a show that both fulfilled expectations and offered unexpected pleasures, and that might even enlarge our understanding of this thoroughly studied but still elusive artist.

This third proposal is, of course, a good description of the memorable survey of Matisse's drawings, seen in London and New York more than ten years ago, which assembled over one hundred and fifty exemplary works, from the best known to the most recherché, from private and public collections all over the world. Since the joint organizers were those superpowers, the Arts Council of Great Britain and the Museum of Modern Art—who, in addition to employing knowledgeable, and energetic curators, exercise phenomenal clout in the museum world—it isn't surprising that they achieved a truly spectacular, scholarly exhibition "of the third kind." What *is* surprising is that the same could be said of a far more modest but extremely ambitious effort in a commercial gallery, a relatively small but first-rate show that was one of the highlights of New York's fall season. "Henri Matisse: A Survey of Drawings,"[1] at C&M Arts, included thirty-nine works spanning the greater part of Matisse's entire career, from a pair of very fine (and very different) Fauvist ink drawings from 1906 to a couple

1 "Henri Matisse: A Survey of Drawings" opened at C&M Arts, New York, on October 11, 1996, and closed on December 7. A catalogue of the exhibition, written by Jack Flam, has been published by C&M Arts (53 pages, $40).

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of overscaled, pared-down, brush and ink female heads of 1950 and 1952. There were no late *papiers coupés*, but in compensation, perhaps, the show was punctuated with a few choice examples of Matisse's sculpture. What made the exhibition most notable was not just the generally high level of the works exhibited, but the mixture of impressively famous and impressively unexpected drawings of similar degrees of excellence.

In this well chosen exhibition, the art historian could happily note that the trajectory of Matisse's evolution was neatly accounted for by examples from key series; the Fauve-period nudes and the late heads bracketed Nice-period odalisques, images of young women in that well-known Roumanian blouse, sculpturally modeled seated nudes, Venice interiors, and more, including a superlative group of drawings related to important canvases. The connoisseur could relish the way Matisse's astonishing virtuosity—and the equally astonishing severity and rigor of his approach—were visible in a selection that ranged from delicate pen and ink line drawings to lush, searching charcoals to exuberant "paintings" in brush and ink; from near-abstract images evoked by economical lines to explicitly rendered, insistently modeled figures, and just about everything in between. And the critic could ponder the relationship between probing studies that revealed Matisse's thought processes and authoritative finished drawings that betrayed no doubt or hesitancy of any kind.

A handful of deservedly famous drawings, which have figured prominently in other Matisse exhibitions, served to anchor the show, setting a level for the rest and coincidentally offering testimony to the powers of research and persuasion of the gallery's director of exhibitions, Robert Pincus-Witten. These touchstones included the Fauve icon *Seated Woman* (1906, private collection), a boldly drawn brush and ink nude, all haunch and jutting shoulder, crooked elbows and crossed knees, angled diagonally across the page against zigzag patterns of wallpaper, fabric, and floor. Like the exhibition's well-known *Study for Portrait of Sarah Stein* (1916, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art), a smudged, exploratory charcoal likeness reduced to minimalist geometry, the Fauve nude was last seen in the Museum of Modern Art's Matisse retrospective. In addition, the survey at C&M included *Seated Figure on a Decorative Background* (1925, private collection), a relaxed charcoal study for the Centre Georges Pompidou's celebrated painting of the same year, in which a sculpturally rendered nude sits rigidly upright against a florid background of extravagant rose-patterned fabric. All of these familiar drawings, which sum up key aspects of Matisse's concerns at pivotal moments, were included in the joint Arts Council-MOMA show in 1984. It was exciting and instructive to see them again, in a new context, but what was perhaps most exciting and certainly most impressive about the current survey was not the presence of such star attractions, but of drawings that were equally accomplished and equally significant to our understanding of Matisse's development *and* that were wholly unfamiliar. Each time I returned to the exhibition, I kept overhearing the phrase "I've never seen that before!" in a tone of pleased amazement, from fellow visitors.

That famous 1906 brush and ink Fuavist nude with the zigzags, for example, was accompanied by another outstanding but almost unknown nude of the same year. This three-quarter standing figure, *The Idol* (private collection), is rendered with a few incisive pen and ink lines, as fragile as the rhythmic brush strokes of *Seated Woman* were bold, a voluptuous body not described by a continuous arabesque, as in the better-known image, but evoked solely by eloquent, emphatic contours, significantly doubled in places, and a setting suggested only by the displacement of the figure to the edge of the sheet. Throughout the show, "standard" Matissean motifs—models in the studio, costumed odalisques, domestic interiors—were represented by strikingly un-

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standard examples. Among the most compelling of these was *The Artist's Studio* (1935, private collection), one of a well-known series of pen and ink images of a reclining nude on a flowered divan, her sprawled body reprised in a background mirror. In some, an instantly recognizable reflection of a bearded man with glasses betrays Matisse's presence, adding another level of complexity to an apparently straightforward, if gloriously drawn, improvisation on a studio set-up. In others, more complex still, the viewer and the artist (whom Michael Fried calls the "first beholder" of his work), are conflated by the inclusion, in the lower right corner of the sheet, of Matisse's drawing board and his hand, shown in the act of creating the image of the drawing before us.

In the version at C&M, the viewer was made into an active participant by the presence of both of Matisse's hands, cropped by the edge of the sheet so that the seemingly unbridgeable distance between the work of art and the random actuality around it collapsed, and the viewer was forced to recapitulate, albeit at several removes, the experience of the artist at work. In this wonderful drawing, the image of Matisse's left hand grips the drawing board; as we watch, his right hand, which holds the pen, produces a self-referential drawing within a drawing—drawing board included—in an endlessly engaging layering of the "real" and the depicted, all within the confines of the invented. That the rhythm of delicate arabesques on the model's divan continues across the depicted drawing on the board, and that the play of the overlapping rectangles of the mirror, the drawing board, and the drawing of the drawing wreaks havoc with conventional perspectival relationships, not only adds to the work's fascination, but reminds us of the artist's role as artificer and manipulator of perceptions.

The range and complexity of Matisse's drawings that were so evident in the survey at C&M are, of course, reflections of the lifelong importance of drawing within his practice. Despite the obviously paramount role of color and of the material properties of paint as expressive components in Matisse's work, he never ceased to regard drawing in a variety of media to be essential to every aspect of his art, throughout his long career. At the beginning of his excellent essay in the exhibition catalogue, the Matisse scholar Jack Flam, who edited and translated the artist's writings into English, categorizes drawing as "a critical part" of his working day; Matisse drew, Flam reminds us, "in order to explore and contemplate the world, as a means of making preparatory studies for paintings, and for sheer pleasure."

Flam goes on to discuss the distinction Matisse made between what he apparently thought of as "analytical" drawings and those he considered "finished" works of art, and discusses the evolving role of drawing at different times in Matisse's career, from an exercise in perception (drawings as artifacts of the effort to translate acute observations into visual language) to an embodiment of acute feeling (drawings as carriers of disciplined, displaced emotion). Flam notes how changeable such distinctions could be, like the distinction between "analytical" and "finished" work itself, citing, for example, Matisse's intermittent return to what Flam calls "a more 'objective' mode of rendering," particularly at moments of crisis and stress. The core of Flam's provocative essay, however, has to do not with Matisse's practice, but with the meaning of drawing within that practice. As Flam states,

> Drawing was not only an indispensable technical activity for Matisse, but also an important moral one. It involved a constant test of character, a way of verifying the purity of his inner being. For it required not only extreme virtuosity but also deep self-examination. And since virtuosity and self-knowledge may be situated at opposite ends of the spectrum of human concerns, in his drawings Matisse somehow sought to balance these competing

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> demands by maintaining a rigorous purity of thought and of action.

Flam carefully examines Matisse's most explicit comments on drawing, itemized in "Notes of a Painter on his Drawing," the artist's only essay devoted to his thoughts on the subject, published in the summer of 1939. Matisse describes how he uses forgiving, flexible media, such as charcoal and stump, in his quest for essential linear elements that are expressive of his perceptions and of his feelings about his subjects—although he implies that we should not make too much of such emotional connections; he goes on to explain how these explorations become the basis for "pure" line drawings in ink that bear no trace of the process of search and modification so visible in the smudged and wiped charcoal drawings. Flam not only evaluates these observations in light of Matisse's methods at different times, but sets them in context by recapitulating the special circumstances that provoked "Notes of a Painter"—that is, the 1938 publication of an introduction to an album of Matisse's drawings written by the critic Claude Roger-Marx. (Roger-Marx, who had written earlier on Matisse's graphics, was the son of Roger Marx, the critic who wrote the first published essay on Matisse's painting, included in the catalogue of his first one-man show in 1904.) Matisse disliked the son's essay and wrote the "Notes," in part, as a rebuttal to set the record straight.

Flam agrees with Matisse, noting that while Roger-Marx's essay is subtly argued, he not only fails to account convincingly for the extreme variability of Matisse's style, but he seems to underestimate the deep seriousness, the selfless spirit of formal and emotional inquiry with which Matisse approached drawing—which Flam characterizes as "a new conception of what might constitute 'probity' in art" and "a new language of feeling." Yet Flam argues that the issues raised by the very different documents produced by artist and critic "remain central to an understanding of Matisse's art." From a careful reading of "Notes of a Painter on his Drawing" and from careful scrutiny of the drawings themselves, Flam posits another model, made more systematic in the 1930s and alluded to in Matisse's own essay, which he describes as follows:

> Matisse conceptualized his procedure of drawing motifs first in a fluid medium such as charcoal in order to explore their expressive possibilities—and, I would say, in order to feel his way into the form in a tactile manner—and then to come back to the same or similar subjects and render them in pure line, as a means of distilling the experiences that he had accumulated while working in charcoal.

At the heart of this, Flam asserts, is not theory, nor dispassionate "decorativeness," but a quest for authentic feeling. Flam's essay is thoughtful, provocative, and eminently readable, a welcome addition to the literature on Matisse's drawings, which is surprisingly sparse, given the esteem in which this aspect of his work is held. (Among the few relatively recent additions to the subject are John Elderfield's essay in the catalogue that accompanied the 1984 Arts Council-MOMA drawing retrospective and Jack Cowart's discussion of the Moroccan sketchbooks in the catalogue of the superb exhibition jointly organized in 1990 by the U.S. and what was then the U.S.S.R., *Matisse in Morocco*.)

Absorbing as the issues raised by Flam may be, the drawings at C&M stand or fall entirely on their own merits, and the great majority of the exhibited works are very good indeed. Whether the stunning charcoal drawing of a crouching *Female Nude* (1936, private collection, courtesy Thomas Gibson Fine Art) or the slightly later *Woman Resting* (1944, private collection), folded into an oversized chair, were intended as investigations of motifs for other uses or as ends in themselves seems less important than their suave adjustment of masses, or the way voluptuous forms, eco-

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nomically implied by modulated expanses of tone and assured arcs of line, carve out space against the sheet of paper. Yet no matter how pleasurable and stimulating the best works in the show are simply as drawings, some of them obviously exist not only as independent works of art, but in relation to specific paintings. Part of the fascination of the splendid late brush and ink drawing *Interior* (1948, collection of Bill and Donna Acquavella, New York), for example, resides in its connection with the Phillips Collection's familiar *Interior with Egyptian Curtain* (1948), that light-struck, black interior with a huge window obscured by staccato palm fronds and a curtain splashed with loops and patches red, green, and white. The brilliant black and white masses of the drawing set the tone for the canvas, although, curiously, Matisse altered the roles of each color when he changed scale and medium.

The drawing is constructed with almost equal amounts of black and white; in the painting, black predominates, as an equivalent for blinding light, while white is restricted to a kind of backlighting that escapes through the palm branches or tempers the curtain's clashes of saturated red and green. Matisse is more profligate with the elements of his motif in the drawing; he includes not only the palm fronds that fill the window, the curtain, and the bowl of pomegranates that we know from the painting, but, among other things, a spindly-legged table, a leopard-skin rug, and an aggressive philodendron that populate many of his other studio interiors of the period. Perhaps the economy of the painting's structure has something to do with its sumptuous color, or conversely, the relative complexity of the drawing is somehow related to its being executed only in black ink on creamy paper. In either case, Flam's reading of Matisse's process as one of assimilation and distillation is borne out by the fact that the Phillips Collection's fine painting is notably simpler than the related drawing. *Interior with Egyptian Curtain* is a dark picture that blinds us with its light—which, it turns out, is the essential subject of the drawing *Interior*, not the appealing, anecdotal inclusions of furnishings we recognize as habitual players in Matisse's private dramas. The drawing implies the significance of light among a variety of other things; the painting makes light essential.

I kept asking myself which drawing I would most like to take home with me, not an easy question to answer, given the number of superior works in the show, but repeated visits confirmed my initial enthusiasm for a severe, not overtly seductive charcoal drawing of 1939, *Woman Reading* (private collection, courtesy Thomas Gibson Fine Art). The verticals and horizontals of chair and table, as solemn and measured as the façade of a classical temple, pin the introspective figure against the sheet, while smoky passages of tone and rhythmically curved lines simultaneously suggest volume and dematerialize the image. Subtle intersections of limbs, book, furniture, and a reflection in a wall-hung mirror make this apparently forthright image spatially unstable, by setting up counter-rhythms to the (deceptively) foursquare composition. Like *Interior*, however, *Woman Reading* is related to a painting, *Reader on a Black Background* (1939, Centre Georges Pompidou), also known as *The Pink Table*, which quietly asserted its authority throughout the duration of the Matisse retrospective. In the painting, the architectural complexities implicit in the charcoal drawing are made explicit as radiant color shapes—books, perhaps—whose trajectory through space animates the geometry of the composition. Just how Matisse accomplished this in the drawing with smudges, a few curved lines, and a scaffolding of parallel verticals is part of what makes *Woman Reading* so inexhaustible.

I kept thinking that this obscure drawing seemed familiar, even though I was reasonably sure I hadn't seen it in any previous exhibitions. It wasn't simply that I had spent a good deal of time with *Reader on a Black Background*. A search through the

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books on my Matisse shelf provided the answer in the form of a little volume that I'd forgotten I had, *Henri Matisse: Dessins*, from the French series "Dessins des Maîtres" edited by Maurice Malingue. (The dedication reminded me that it had been a birthday present from my closest high school friends, longer ago than I care to admit in public.) A glance at M. Malingue's introduction confirmed that the book was the usual poetic French "parallel experience," but it noted at the end that the selection of drawings had been made "par M. Henri Matisse." The plates section opened, of its own accord, to the first of the reproductions, described only as "charcoal drawing, August 1939"—*Woman Reading*. Just for the record, I found another of the drawings I had liked best at C&M in the Malingue book, a free-wheeling pen and ink interior, *Matisse's Dining Room* (1941, collection of Dr. and Mrs. Martin L. Gecht, Chicago). Nothing important, as they say, ever gets lost.

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Art

Richard Lindner: a New Yorker in Washington

by Mario Naves

New Yorkers have become complacent in the knowledge that their city is the capital of the art world. Manhattan is the center of the business of art, and there are, lest we forget, a daunting number of artists who work there. Nonetheless, there is a nagging sense that this may not always be the case. Recently, there has been a spate of important, and probably definitive, museum exhibitions in the United States that did not travel to the Big Apple. Monet and Degas in Chicago, Brancusi and Cézanne in Philadelphia, and Vermeer in Washington have, to a degree, undermined New York's standing. Not a few New Yorkers have wondered why these shows didn't make it to a more appropriate (and convenient) location—say, the upper East Side. The Vermeer exhibition, in particular, has caused many an acquaintance who couldn't make the trek to rue having missed it.

The painter Richard Lindner (1901–1978) isn't in a class with Vermeer—who is?—but it is unfortunate all the same that his retrospective, the first in almost twenty years, will not travel to New York. This is unfortunate for two reasons. First, Lindner was a good, if unnerving, painter whose *oeuvre* deserves more recognition than it currently receives from the New York art establishment. Second, his paintings, drawings, and watercolors are so much of Manhattan that it is a shame they won't be shown there. Having arrived as an émigré to the United States in 1941, the German-born Lindner claimed his status as, not an American, but "a product of New York, a New Yorker." And it was Lindner's adopted city that became the hub of his paintings.

Although titles like *42nd Street* (1964) and *F.B.I. on East 69th Street* (1972) make the geographical connection, Lindner never explicitly depicted New York in his paintings. His confrontational imagery—wherein fashion governs and social and sexual dysfunction are the rule—are simultaneously a cliché of city life and a celebration of it. One of the striking aspects of "Richard Lindner: Paintings and Watercolors, 1948–1977"[1] is how contemporary—one is tempted to say "relevant"—these thirty-year-old paintings are. Looking at *Woman* (1968), with its portrayal of mechanized sexuality and loping rhythms, one is struck by how it jibes with a society that claims such cultural artifacts as phone sex and boom boxes. Nor is Lindner's depiction of urban life (or a chunk of it, anyway) less timely. There have been few images that capture the romance

1 "Richard Lindner: Paintings and Watercolors, 1948–1977" opened at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, on October 17, 1996, and remains on view through January 12, 1997. The show will reopen at the Haus der Kunst, Munich (February 14–April 13, 1997). A catalogue of the exhibition, by Judith Zilczer, with essays by Peter Selz and Claudia Loyall, has been published by the Hirshhorn Museum and Prestel-Verlag (172 pages, $65; $35 paper).

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and futility of nihilism as clinically as *The Street* (1963). Lindner may have reveled in stereotype, but he did get at the crux of what makes the city and, especially, New York singular and troubling. As seen in the nation's capital, Lindner's work was the proverbial fish-out-of-water.

If Lindner is thought of at all it is usually in the context of Pop Art. It's not hard to see why. Lindner was a successful commercial artist before becoming a painter and his work is distinguished by a terse graphic sensibility. His paintings are theatrical and possess a biting wit; they can also be abrasive. Populating Lindner's universe are cartoonish types—gangsters, rock 'n' roll stars, Bavarian wunderkinder, and Lindner's signature icon: a woman who is equal parts Amazon and dominatrix. These characters are blatantly set out on display, and there is a chilly, voyeuristic timbre to Lindner's scenarios. (One painting is titled *Rear Window*.) The flat, disjunctive spaces of his paintings recall the frontality of posters, and their hard, bright colors are reminiscent of comic books, billboards, and signs. "The most impressive visual experience I have," said the eminently quotable Lindner ". . . is seeing trucks on First Avenue all painted with messages." Such a statement lends itself to reading Lindner as a cheerleader for mass culture; in short, as a Pop artist.

But this association is as durable as a Kleenex. If Lindner is a Pop artist he is as much of one as Stuart Davis; which is to say: kind of, but not quite. Lindner was, to be sure, enamored of the spectacle and vulgarity of pop culture. But he transformed what he saw at Macy's or on 42nd Street into something else altogether. The Hirshhorn has unintentionally underscored this distinction in "The Collection Reviewed: Contemporary Art," a concurrent exhibition culled from the museum's holdings. One of the galleries following the Lindner retrospective is devoted to Pop Art, perhaps as an attempt to mainstream Lindner's work—making the odd man out fit in, so to speak. His paintings, however, refuse pigeonholing and show up artists like Mel Ramos, Tom Wesselman, and Larry Rivers as lightweight and smug. Lindner might have appreciated Ramos's attraction to cheesecake pin-ups, but that doesn't mean he painted cheesy pictures. What elevates Lindner's paintings above the dull inanities of Pop Art is their elusive formal and narrative complexity.

If there is an artist who Lindner puts me in mind of it is Max Beckmann. Both painters share an intensely sober vision that is, paradoxically, enigmatic and peculiarly German; both were fascinated as well by the city, and saw history and horror in its culture and inhabitants. Although Lindner did not begin painting seriously until the age of fifty, his world view seems to have come into being fully formed. (Lindner's commercial art undoubtedly focused him in this regard.) His early paintings, dating from 1948, are somber in mood and color. They owe much to Surrealism, particularly in their quietude, but Lindner's pictorial vocabulary also reflects the influence of Oskar Schlemmer and Fernand Léger. Like Schlemmer and Léger, Lindner rendered his figures as stylized machines, and his paintings don't exude a lot of humanity. They do, however, reveal a deep fascination with the absurdities of human interaction.

The Meeting is considered Lindner's first masterpiece; it is, surely, one of the odder paintings of the latter half of this century. Inside an impossibly claustrophobic room, Lindner has assembled tokens of obsession as well as friends and family: a buffoonish King Ludwig II of Bavaria, Lindner's sister Lissy, the artist as a child with his aunt, and friends Hedda Sterne, Evelyn Hofer, and Saul Steinberg. The compositional anchors of the *The Meeting*, however, are a corseted woman whose back is toward us and a large cat who stares at the viewer in an accusatory manner. The bits-and-pieces quality of the painting is typical of Lindner's compositions, although the space seen here is more "realistic" than the abstracted environments that were to follow. The isolation of each figure stems from Lindner's collagelike sen-

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sibility. The portraits of Sterne and Steinberg, for instance, are based on photographs (documented in the catalogue) and their incongruity is due, in part, to the artist's working methods. But Lindner's best paintings don't surrender to fragmentation, they flirt with it, and *The Meeting*'s symbolic and pictorial density goes beyond cleverness. Its tenor is not unlike the stately detachment of Balthus's work. If Lindner's paintings retain something of the mechanical in their structuring, they are like the device seen in the background of *Boy with Machine* (1954): an expertly constructed contraption whose function eludes rational denotation.

By the early 1960s, Lindner's imagery became increasingly iconographic and embraced an artifice that took his figures beyond caricature into a slick mannerism. The one character that comes to define his work of the time is the woman or, more appropriately, The Woman. Bulky and impressive, she is a powerful and implacable force; a fetish figure whose sexuality is brassy but never erotic. Lindner's "armored women," as Peter Selz calls them in his catalogue essay, are parodies of sensuality—is it any wonder that Lindner felt compelled to paint Marilyn Monroe? At times, such figures come precariously close to embodying the misogyny the artist sought to expose. Lindner was always fascinated with fashion—the lovingly rendered garment in *The Corset* (1954) is a fanciful bit of abstraction—but here fascination turns into a kind of mania. Fashion, for Lindner, was not only a means of establishing character, but also an excuse to break up the human form into shape, pattern, and decoration. This was as true for Lindner's men as it was for his women. The tiger-skin wrap and metallic purple jacket worn by the (I'm guessing) pimp in *Rear Window* (1971), for example, is a marvelously outrageous invention.

I must admit that many of Lindner's paintings are not to my taste. His colors can be discordant and his compositions cluttered. That the sour purples, greens, and yellows in *Moon over Alabama* (1963) are meant to grate doesn't stop them from being god-awful. Yet just as one is about to conclude that Lindner was an unctuous, if expert, composite of Botero, Vargas, and Chester Gould, he comes up with a painting so weirdly accomplished that it confounds and engages. Such a painting is *Hello* (1966). Here a masked woman, whose apparel combines the ersatz pizzazz of a streetwalker's garb with the ornamentation of a superhero costume, talks on a telephone. She is placed in the center of the canvas, with her legs spread, and has a target superimposed on her thigh. To the left a brightly colored parrot enters the picture; a red stripe borders the painting at right. It is an incredibly contrived picture. Yet, great contrivance suits Lindner's world. In his essay, Selz leads off with a quote from Bell Hooks on Madonna. At first, I thought this an unnecessarily trendy citation in an otherwise insightful piece. But Lindner's representation of packaged female sexuality—up front and in charge, if short on warmth—may well be the real material girl. *Hello* is talismanic, unerringly crisp, and unsettling; it is an unforgettable painting.

Selz ends his essay by stating, wisely, that "it would be disingenuous to claim that . . . Lindner's paintings are the work of a feminist." Yet by insisting that Lindner presented "women as the stronger gender at a time when feminism was becoming an important issue in postmodern culture," he doesn't entirely avoid portraying Lindner as a political artist. I can't say that I blame him. There is, after all, a stern (if mordant) moralism at work in the paintings. But labeling Lindner a political artist is ultimately as meaningless as calling him a Pop artist or, for that matter, a Surrealist. His paintings are as slippery as they are audacious. This may be why they carry no cachet in a New York art scene that thrives on tidy answers. Lindner knew better, of course. Art—like history, sex, politics, and New York—isn't tidy in the least. This is but one reason why Manhattan will miss "Richard Lindner."

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Music

Harnoncourt conducts Beethoven

by James F. Penrose

Classical musicians in the late twentieth century appear to have largely abandoned the ambition to compose new and attractive music. And who can blame them? An indifferent population with a steadily decreasing attention span has made up its mind about new music. Kingsley Amis, with characteristic subtlety, put it best: "Twentieth century music is like paedophilia. No matter how persuasively and persistently its champions urge their cause, it will never be accepted by the public at large, who will continue to regard it with incomprehension, outrage and repugnance."

This is no revelation, particularly to musicians. Drawing on the risk-allocation techniques developed by their brethren in the financial world, the more adaptable of the musical breed have hedged the risk of creative downside (i.e., composing a dud) by simply choosing works by name-brand members of the canon and devising novel renderings for them, renderings generally characterized by the spirit of "authenticity." This so-called "historical performance" movement is an outgrowth of the interest in early music which began to flower in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, perhaps as an antigen to the incipient careers of Igor Stravinsky and Arnold Schönberg.

At their best, the objectives of the movement are defensible. The commentator Marie Leonhardt, for example, has written that the ideal historical performance should allow its composer to hear it "at worst, without bewilderment, and at best, with pleasure." At another extreme are the efforts of the musicologist Joshua Rifkin (of ragtime fame) whose anorexic explication of the Bach B-minor Mass has been described by another scholar as "an eccentric travesty."

The "historical performance" movement has also spawned more than its fair share of amusements. The regular attire of the eccentric Arnold Dolmetsch (1858–1940)—fabricator of repro instruments, hater of musicologists, and father of the revivalist movement—was a green velvet suit complete with lace ruffles, knee britches, and buckled pumps. When performing the works of Elizabethan composers at his house "Dowland," Dolmetsch cavorted about assisting artists in period costume. James Joyce was sufficiently entranced that he planned on traveling "the South of England from Falmouth to Margate singing old English songs" with a Dolmetsch lute. More recently (and more notoriously) Wanda Landowska made her fatuous remark that "you play Bach *your* way, and I'll play him *his* way"—a rich comment from one who performed on a modern Pleyel pedal harpsichord and who entertained few scruples about exercising interpretive license in her performance of Bach's work. It was perhaps with such incongruities in mind that Joseph Kerman dourly noted that "historical performance" is essentially an attitude of mind rather than a set of techniques.

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Along with Gustav Leonhardt, Nikolaus Harnoncourt is among the most prominent interpreters in the "historical performance" movement. Mr. Harnoncourt's prolific work is characterized by high degrees of instrumental proficiency and vocal polish from his performers and by a flexible approach that combines textual fidelity with imaginative interpretation—in some cases, overly imaginative. His cycle of Monteverdi operas with the Zurich Opera in the 1970s is remembered both for its virtuosity and its theatrical flamboyance: in one performance a soprano draped herself over the time-beating conductor, weeping and gesticulating to the uninterrupted flow of the music. Around the same time, Mr. Harnoncourt released a recording of Handel's *Water Music* suite notable for its flatulent horns and catarrhal woodwinds. This recording prompted a witheringly hostile broadcast review from the critic Martin Goldsmith.

These days, however, matters appear to be more sedate. Mr. Harnoncourt's credentials as an interpreter of the Baroque have been well established with recordings of the Bach Passions and the complete Cantatas. In the late 1980s, he turned his attention to the Classical period, particularly the Beethoven symphonies, recording the full cycle with the Chamber Orchestra of Europe in 1990 and 1991. That same ensemble performed the symphonies in Carnegie Hall this past November.

Mr. Harnoncourt presented the symphonies in five imaginative programs over the course of a week.[1] The English writer and broadcaster Anthony Hopkins has commented on the highly self-referential nature of the cycle—how the individual symphonies constantly allude to and reflect upon each other. Mr. Harnoncourt certainly seemed to be thinking along those lines, for rather than performing the symphonies *seriatim*, he enlivened matters by presenting the works in out-of-sequence pairings. The Ninth Symphony (D minor, op. 125), which culminated the series, was the only work he performed by itself. There are manifest reasons for this solitary prominence, beginning with the length of the Ninth Symphony, though one could have wished for yet another pairing—perhaps with one of the Symphony's foundation stones, the underperformed *Choral Fantasy* (op. 80).

Saturday, November 16. Mr. Harnoncourt opened the cycle with Beethoven's Fourth Symphony (B-flat major, op. 60), surely the least-appreciated of the nine. Preceded by the enormous "Eroica" and followed by the even more famous Fifth Symphony (the first two movements of which were completed before the Fourth was even started), this elegant work was viewed even by its composer as something of an afterthought.

The symphony commences with a thirty-eight bar *Adagio* that Mr. Harnoncourt presented in spacious and darkly colored style before a vivacious transition to the *Allegro* main theme. In these first few minutes were the elements of what was to unfold over the next several performances—musical lines of great clarity and strength, delivered (when called for) at remarkable speed, beautifully colored and phrased. The lyrical second movement improved even on the first, and the concluding *Allegro non troppo* featured lovely work by the cellos and winds.

The Fifth Symphony (C minor, op. 67) was also beautifully played, but the final effect was musically less satisfying than its predecessor. A striking and novel effect appeared right at the beginning of the work in the famous opening four-note phrase: Mr. Haroncourt curtailed and softened the

1 Nikolaus Harnoncourt and the Chamber Orchestra of Europe performed the symphonies of Ludwig van Beethoven at Carnegie Hall, New York, on November 16, 1996, (Nos. 4 and 5); November 17 (Nos. 8 and 6); November 19 (Nos. 1 and 3); November 20 (Nos. 2 and 7); and November 23 (No. 9). Luba Orgonasova (soprano), Birgit Remmert (mezzo-soprano), Endrik Wottrich (tenor), and Thomas Hampson (baritone), along with the Arnold Schoenberg Choir (Erwin Ortner, artistic director), assisted in the Ninth Symphony.

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last note—*duh-duh-duh-dum* rather than, as usual, *duh-duh-duh*-DUMMM. Orchestral playing in the first movement was extraordinarily nimble, little flashes of trumpet brightness setting off the grainy texture of the strings. The overall impression was one of disciplined spontaneity, and the flatulent horn (a trademark?) did nothing to detract from the dexterity of the interpretation. Cellos and woodwinds were especially notable in the succeeding *Andante*, and Mr. Harnoncourt allowed the movement's "astonishing series of meditations and adventures" (in the music critic Donald Tovey's phrase) to unwind fully. Yet, the last movement, for all its virtuosic dash did not satisfy, quite possibly because of its barely subsonic tempo.

Sunday, November 17. The Eighth Symphony (F major, op. 93) also suffered from the sandwich effect visited on the Fourth. Tovey has noted that the Seventh Symphony was too big for its time (while the Ninth may well be too big for any time) and that Beethoven wrote the lively and comic Eighth as a counterweight—to little public appreciation. Beethoven himself was pleased with the work, all the more so as it was composed at a time of considerable personal travail. Mr. Harnoncourt resisted the urge to sprint out of the gate in the opening *Allegro vivace e con brio*, instead keeping to a measured but propulsive tempo. The second movement (in B-flat) was distinguished by the precise quality of its attack while the succeeding *Minuet* featured wonderful balance between the violins and cellos. The warmly affectionate last movement again showed the strings to their full advantage.

Mr. Harnoncourt's interpretation of the Sixth Symphony (F major, op. 68) concluded the matinee. His version of the "Pastorale" was quite unusual: the opening F-major *Allegro ma non troppo* was rendered cool in concept and execution. Most performances of this movement suggest something of a half-smile on the part of composer and conductor, but such was not the case here. Phrasing and articulation were on the somber side, despite the warmth of the key. Nevertheless, the temperature increased with the ardent *Andante*. The third movement commenced with its bursting theme rendered more *pianissimo* than I have ever heard it played. In rows L through Q, six right legs, crossed over their respective lefts, majestically bobbed in the aisle in strict tempo as the music danced toward the *Allegro*. At the point of the thunderstorm, several of the violins and violas literally left their seats at the onset of the musical downpour. The symphony concluded with a ravishing, revolving *Allegretto* in which the violins made the most extraordinary and moving cries of joy. After its rather inauspicious start, Mr. Harnoncourt's interpretation evolved in a most captivating fashion; at its conclusion the audience waited a good six seconds in silence before commencing its orgiastic war-dance. The performances of this work and the Eighth were easily the most impassioned of the series.

Tuesday, November 19. The modern musical era began in 1800 with the performance of Beethoven's First Symphony (C major, op. 21). In this gravely amusing work, Mr. Harnoncourt, particularly in the first movement, showed the adaptability of his orchestra to a wind band with its effortless surges, powerful tutti, and exuberant, reverberant, and happy closing chords. The fugal treatment of the opening statement in the *Andante* was neatly done, and the concluding *Allegro* was light and crisp.

Beethoven's Third Symphony (E flat, op. 55), popularly subtitled "Eroica," was completed by early 1804 and was to be the composer's longest work save for the D-minor Ninth. The work begins with two big staccato chords in E-flat played by full orchestra that Mr. Harnoncourt interpreted somewhat less emphatically than an aggressive conductor such as Herbert von Karajan. What Mr. Harnoncourt did do, unfortunately, was lead the orchestra at a very fast tempo. The principal theme (being simply the notes of the tonic chord swinging back

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and forth) was rushed by the cellos. The price paid was high, for the velocity of the movement obscured the harmonic "clouding" of the principal theme—an effect that Tovey described as the basis of one of the most astonishing and subtle dramatic strokes in all music. Similarly, the *Marcia funebre* second movement was inappropriately hasty (the movement is not marked "Funeral Trot") and the Prometheus music in the last movement was similarly leached of its personality. As was the case with the Fifth Symphony and the first part of the Sixth, the musical character and interpretation of the Third were sacrificed to virtuosity (I never thought I could admit to such a thing).

Wednesday, November 20. Mr. Harnoncourt's penultimate evening began with the Second Symphony (D major, op. 36) and concluded with the Seventh (A major, op. 92). The Second Symphony, the most Haydnish of the set, was given a warm and compelling reading with the same elements of tensile strength, clarity, and power that had characterized the performance of the Fourth Symphony several days before. As for the Seventh, its *Poco sostenuto* first movement benefited from Mr. Harnoncourt's calm tempo and had overall a spacious and well-aired effect. The principal theme of the second-movement *Allegretto* was beautifully shaped while the Bacchanalian finale was, well, Bacchanalian.

Saturday, November 23. The last evening of the cycle was, of course, given over to the Ninth Symphony (D minor, op. 125). Were everything of this symphony to be lost except for the infinitesimal first movement, that fragment alone would, for many, still be among the greatest music ever written. Mr. Harnoncourt performed this empyrean movement with a songlike lyricism not often heard, concluding in great strength but without any sense of being overpowering. The *Scherzo* second movement (slightly soured for those who remember its incessantly televised repetition on the Huntley/Brinkley Report during the 1960s) was clean and light with a hint of manic playfulness. For me, the best thing about the choral exposition of the *Finale* is its orchestral introduction where the ghosts of the initial D-minor theme, the *Scherzo*, and the *Adagio* whirl through the first seventy bars, each dissolving in its turn. The soloists themselves were all in good voice, if not particularly remarkable, while the instrumental performance remained at the same high level that the audience had grown to accept as its due from this excellent orchestra and its equally gifted chief.

Mr. Harnoncourt's performances of these works suggest that "authenticity" and "historical performances" are not necessarily bywords for pedantry. There was plenty of risk-taking in the phrasing and emphases of these interpretations. Occasionally, these effects (particularly the rapid tempi) were distracting, but overall the effect was one of freshness and vigor. An adventurous Beethoven is perhaps not to everyone's taste, but to this listener, at least, Mr. Harnoncourt's approach represents a welcome change to both the surfeit of embalmed interpretations populating the performance spectrum and the eccentric ones dwelling upon its fringes.

Without a doubt, the controversies over what constitutes acceptable verisimilitude in performance practice will continue. Nevertheless, "success will come," wrote the critic Paul Henry Lang, "when we are able to forego the restrictive category 'old music' and make it an integral part of our musical experience." The same sentiments certainly apply to the "historical performance," the very *raison d'être* of "old music," although artists like Nikolaus Harnoncourt, whose scholarly gravity is leavened by sound musical instincts, have no need to wait for future vindication.

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The media

The pity of PBS's "Great War"

by James Bowman

In one of many excellent passages in his new book, *PBS: Behind the Screen*,[1] Laurence Jarvik characterizes the political views of one of that network's most beloved symbols, Bill Moyers:

> In questions of foreign affairs, from his opposition to the war in Vietnam onward, Moyers has attempted to declare foreign conflicts the result of misunderstandings, not substantive disagreements. This approach, the product of both deeply religious impulses and a conventionally liberal political outlook, has resulted in his maintaining a number of curiously naïve positions masquerading as sophisticated interpretations of international developments.

But this is more than just a personal idiosyncrasy of Lyndon Johnson's former chief of staff. It is, in fact, an attitude built in, as it were, to the ethos of the network that the Johnson administration gave birth to. This was once again made apparent with the blockbuster series *The Great War and the Shaping of the Twentieth Century*[2] which ran on eight successive nights in mid-November. A joint production of KCET Los Angeles and the BBC, with the assistance of the British Imperial War Museum and financing from, among others, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the series afforded a perfect example of the sort of television history so congenial to PBS. It may be the only kind of history left us after the combined efforts of the politicians and the educators of America have finally succeeded in destroying the humanities.

To be sure, they picked an ideal subject. Every few years, people have to be shocked anew by the First World War. It's almost a rite of generational passage, or it was when I was teaching and "the War Poets" were among the most popular items on the syllabus. Sensitive late-adolescent boys invariably identified themselves with Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen and their curious combination of premature worldly wisdom, arrogance, and self-pity. I myself never thought that even the much ballyhooed Owen was much of a poet. There didn't seem to me to be any particular *ars poetica* in rubbing people's noses in indiscriminate slaughter, and, indeed, Owen himself, in his famous dictum about how his subject was "war and the pity of war," seemed to disavow any specifically poetic ambition. "The poetry is in the pity," he said. But if it was, it was sitting very quietly

1 *PBS: Behind the Screen*, by Laurence Jarvik; Prima Publishing, 320 pages, $25.

2 *The Great War and the Shaping of the Twentieth Century*, produced by KCET and the BBC in association with the Imperial British War Museum. Executive producer: Blaine Baggett. Chief historian and co-producer: Jay Winter. Narrated by Salome Jens (PBS Home Video, $24.98 per cassette; $99.98 for the four-cassette set).

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somewhere in a corner of the pity and not saying much at all. Meanwhile, the pernicious notion that, if you had enough pity, the poetry would take care of itself, has infected and corrupted the poetic enterprise from that day to this.

Naturally, the PBS series began with Wilfred Owen and stuck to him like glue. "Known as one of his nation's greatest poets," the voice-over informed us, Owen was nevertheless only one of nine million killed in the war. "What happened and why?" At one level, the series purported to offer an answer, but this turned out to be a farrago of cheap psychodrama and left-wing truisms. The kaiser had a withered left arm and he wanted as big a navy as his British cousins, with whom he used to play war games on the Isle of Wight when he was a boy. The attempt to establish a direct connection between boyish rivalry and nine million dead helped to underscore the point that it was the very institution of monarchy itself which led to catastrophe. "To the monarchs who ruled most of Europe, the technology explosion simply meant more—more money, more power, more colonies," opined the series's co-producer and principal historian, Jay M. Winter of Cambridge University.

At another level, however, the series made a virtue of incomprehension. "We had lost the battle," it quotes a French soldier; "I did not know why or how." You might think that a historian would proceed to tell us what the poor devil on the spot couldn't figure out; but no, his bewildered uncertainty is brought forward as *prima facie* evidence that no one knew why or how, and that the war, like those who started it and kept it going for four long years, was utterly irrational. Again and again we are asked questions like: "What does it all mean, this surging tide of armed men?"—and the absence of any answer is meant to imply that it means nothing. The question is taken up from the letters and diaries of soldiers, as when the French mutiny of 1917 is presaged by the fact that soldiers were beginning "to wonder what they were fighting for." Evelyn Blucher, the British wife of a Prussian nobleman is prominently quoted as asking: "What is it all for?" Wilfred Owen's brother, Harold, is just one of many said to have been haunted for the rest of his life by the question of why his brother had to die.

The implication is that the question had no answer, though this was emphatically not true of other difficult questions. As the great powers prepared for war, for example, we are told with confident certainty that the gap between the haves and the have-nots in Europe continued to grow, European imperialists were exploiting and oppressing native populations, and women were denied the vote because, it was said, they had smaller brains. The patriarchal power structure was force-feeding suffragettes while engaging in "an all-out arms race" and putting women to work in munitions factories where they were made ill by TNT poisoning when they weren't being blown up. The European powers involved "tens of thousands of Africans in the white man's war"—which experience taught them "what western civilization had to offer." Likewise, "the U.S. was going to war to make the world safe for democracy, but its own house was far from in order" because of the race riots of 1917 and the treatment of black soldiers.

Here is an interesting reversal. It used to be that historians were full of information about why the great events of history—especially wars—took place. One does not have to be very old to remember that staple of schoolboy history lessons, the injunction to list five causes of the Revolutionary War, or the Civil War, or the First World War. That such causes were the stuff of history was taken for granted by one and all, while more metaphysical questions about social, sexual, racial, or class discrimination were left to philosophers and theologians. Now the situation is reversed. History, at least in this popularized version, is exclusively concerned with social attitudes and the tendency of authority to trample on the rights of individuals and minorities, while the question of the rationale behind the actions

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of those in power is left up to the metaphysicians—with a strong recommendation that it be considered unanswerable, apart from vague suggestions that it must have to do with the hereditary principle or possibly capitalism.

But the program's aggressive nescience with respect to traditional historical questions could be highly selective. One of its representative figures was an American sergeant called Silver Parrish, who was part of the allied expeditionary force to Archangel that attempted to intervene in the Russian Civil War. Parrish is brought on to express the obligatory incomprehension about his mission as well as distaste for the idea that it might be on behalf of the tsars who, he thinks, "kept the people in poverty and ignorance" for centuries. "Most people favor the bolos [i.e. Bolsheviks]," he tells us, "and I don't blame them." But if the question of why the soldiers were there is still purportedly a mystery, Jay Winter has no doubts about one thing. He states categorically that "the Cold War was born then and there" with the allied intervention in the Civil War—though of course he offers no evidence at all except for Parrish's regret in his diary at having had to burn down a village after the women pleaded with him not to do it.

It does seem remarkable that Stalin—after thirty years and millions dead in wars, famines, and purges, and fully occupied, in the years immediately after the Second World War, with the business of slaughtering, torturing, and imprisoning more millions of his own people—should have found time to remember with such bitterness the burning of a village by Americans in 1918. But that's PBS history for you: it may not know much about the workings of power, but it knows everything there is to know about historical guilt and innocence. In this lurid moral chiaroscuro, the good guys are socialists, suffragettes, and professors while the bad guys are monarchs, patriots, and generals—the kind of people who regarded the assassination of the Archduke Franz Ferdinand, said Jay Winter, as "a test of character rather than a test of national interest." For it was such people who started the war. "The hidden element in the war crisis of 1914," he claimed, "is the word 'honor'"—defense of which is said to be "sometimes irrational."

"In every case, it was in no great power's interest to go to war in 1914, and yet they all did it." Why? "Maybe because their honor was at stake." It is an extraordinary statement for a supposedly scholarly historian to make, that "no great power's interest was at stake"! As if honor and interest were entirely disjunct; as if honor were a mere childish bauble and interest calculable apart from it. Nor did the series allow us to hear from a single historian who believes (as, surely, most historians still do believe) that the war was about something and not just a manifestation of criminal greed and folly. If there was any strategic thinking going on in the capitals of Europe in 1914 to 1918, you wouldn't know it from Jay Winter and company. The only kind of strategy which interests them is the purported "new kind of war" on display at Verdun, where both sides explicitly engaged in a war of attrition. "On and on the killing went," says the voice-over. Winter then asks what they did it for—and supplies the correct answer, "virtually nothing." Again the voice-over narration intones: "By this time, soldiers began to question why were they fighting at all."

The press materials supplied by KCET also ask the big question:

> Historians can easily identify the literal "smoking gun" that set the War in motion: a revolver used by a Serbian nationalist to assassinate Archduke Franz Ferdinand (heir apparent to the Austro-Hungarian throne) in Sarajevo on June 28, 1914. But scholars are still debating the underlying causes. Was it the desire for greater empire, wealth and territory? A massive arms race? The series of treaties which ensured that once one power went to war, all of Europe would quickly follow? Was it social turmoil and changing artistic sen-

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> sibilities brought about by the Industrial Revolution? Or was it simply a miscalculation by rulers and generals in power? The answer provided in "The Great War and the Shaping of the 20th Century" is that all these volatile elements combined to set off a gigantic explosion we now know as World War I.

Note that all these proposed explanations except the first assume that the war was irrational, the unintended by-product of (presumably faulty) social institutions and political behaviors, and that all of them assume that there was no moral dimension to the conflict—i.e., the war was simply a "man-made catastrophe" in which all sides were equally to blame—and so equally innocent. It is this kind of cheap sophistication which is the hallmark of PBS history: we know that no one is going to be so naïve as to suggest that one side might have been in the right and the other in the wrong. Even Hitler, in the final segments' look forward to the Second World War, is seen as a product of the Treaty of Versailles.

Over and over again, the series indulges in the same kind of smug condescension toward those who fought the war:

> Most of the leaders in 1914 had no real idea of the war machine they were putting into motion. Many believed the War would be over by Christmas 1914. But by the end of the first year, a new kind of war emerged on the battlefield that had never been seen before—or repeated since: stalemate. The result was a war that went on for 1,500 days. Before the official Armistice was declared on November 11, 1918, nine million people had died on the battlefield and the world was forever changed. . . . The Great War, a leap into the modern age, unleashed an avalanche of the primitive. This paradox has characterized the 20th century.

Warfare itself, in this version of history, is "primitive" and modern machines merely the pretext for "the descent into a world of unparalleled brutality." The words "brutality" and "brutalization," used constantly by the writers of the series, seem to mean nothing in particular to do with animals (i.e., brutes) but only that soldiers had got rather good at killing. Likewise, Blaine Baggett, Winter's co-producer, says: "The century has become more and more violent, and we've become more brutalized and more numb because of what we've been through." We? Such factitious wisdom, born of having "been through" the war vicariously is responsible for the series's relentless self-righteousness. Indeed, it could be said that such cheap, PBS sophistication has shaped our age even more than the First World War, which provides its pretext.

"The last thing any of us want to do is romanticize the war," Winter says, as he proclaims his determination to "show all sides. Nobody's history is privileged over anyone else's. The important thing to understand about the War is that it was a common disaster." This is the important thing to understand if you are a pacifist. If you are not, of course, it is precisely wrong: the important thing to understand is who's in the right—or whose history, if you like, is "privileged." Winter is a pacifist, albeit a PBS-style, unacknowledged one, like Ken Burns in his celebrated series on the Civil War. "Why has extraordinary violence come to be taken as absolutely normal?" he asks. "I believe it stems from the way in which states operate, and teach their citizens the rules of the game. . . . It's the idea that the enemy is Evil Incarnate," he adds. "Hatred of the enemy wasn't instilled in people. It came from within their own religious, social, intellectual and cultural networks."

"Ironic" indeed, therefore, is the "exception" he mentions to this rule in the fact that "for the most part, soldiers didn't hate each other." In other words, the "exceptions" to the rule include almost the entirety of the two opposing armies! But Winter takes journalistic and popular-cultural sentiment as representing the superior reality, even though those who were actually doing the fighting did not share it, because it fits with his own, largely pacifist, preconceptions. The only example of this "populist" history

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of what he calls "racist" hysteria in action seems to be in the massacre of the Armenians by the Turks in 1915. Winter's view is that genocide was simply a part of "the logic of the brutalization of total war." In the companion book to the series he writes that "the cultural politics of hatred flourished in total war, creating the conditions for atrocity and genocide." Yet those who carried out this massacre were largely illiterate and presumably the least susceptible to "cultural politics" of all the belligerents.

"The history of World War I is a populist history," claims Winter—and so it is, too, if you leave out, as he does, all the other kinds of history. The other kinds of history, of course, do not lend themselves so readily to the PBS treatment, which is itself surely as superficially journalistic as anything that the hysterical "populist" press of the First World War has to show. Look how the series's propaganda, for example, finds a natural echo in the news media which reports on or supposedly "reviews" it—only to repeat and give wider currency to the propaganda. So in *Newsweek*, Fareed Zakaria wrote the following commentary:

> By the end of the war, the center of world power had shifted from Europe to the United States. Most European states had overturned their ancient monarchies and freed many of their colonial lands. With the end of the kings came the end of an order based on divine rights and natural aristocracies. The legitimacy of the state was now based on (supposedly) rational principles—like liberalism, democracy or communism. This new legitimacy—and the emergency needs of war—brought new powers, like progressive taxation, nationalization of industries and government regulation of many elements of private life. It was, in short, the birth of the modern state.

Almost all of this is demonstrably, ignorantly false. The United States took itself off the world stage after 1919 and was once again a peripheral figure in the geopolitical calculus until after the attack on Pearl Harbor at the end of 1941. "Most" European states, apart from Russia and the defeated belligerents, did not "overturn" their monarchies, and no major overseas colonies were freed until a generation later. German and Turkish colonies were seized by Britain and France. "Divine right" had not figured seriously in European politics since 1789, and the idea of "natural aristocracies" is its opposite. Progressive taxation in most countries (including the United States) antedated the war, and nationalization was rare (except in Russia) until the economic crisis of the 1930s and the Second World War. But the notion of the epochal significance of the war is meant to lend support to what Zakaria calls "the most pervasive of all the legacies of World War I"—namely "the triumph of doubt and skepticism."

> The war began with enthusiasm. Every Englishman marched into battle with the words of Horace ringing in his ears: Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori! How sweet and noble it is to die for your country. Four years later, the horrors of trench warfare, poison gas and machine-gun slaughter had made even the bravest soldier wonder what he was fighting for. Suspicion of authority, doubts about absolutes, irony and cynicism all defined modernity, in life and art.

And then is quoted good old Wilfred Owen on "the old lie" of dulce et decorum est . . .

Likewise, the *U.S. News & World Report* story (by Lewis Lord), repeats the series's (i.e., Winter's) ridiculous suggestion that allied intervention against the Bolsheviks in the Russian civil war led directly to the Cold War. It's all because some American soldiers burnt down a Russian village. This is allegedly "cultural history"—which apparently means history purged of all those elements which are necessary to make sense of what is otherwise merely aimless and pointless suffering. But the aimlessness and pointlessness are valuable to the propagandist because they allow him to apportion blame, according to the vaguest of formulae, to whomever happens to have been in power

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at the time. Thus, the PBS style is in its very essence anti-authority—an attitude that even the most limited of viewers will pick up.

Howard Rosenberg of *The Los Angeles Times* at least got the message after "eight hours of emotional thunderbolts powerful enough to convert possibly the most gung-ho hawk to pacifism."

> You very much have here the sense of regimes acting out of antique honor against their own national interests. And of stout, gaudily medaled, incompetent strutting old fools with thick white mustaches making awful decisions that sacrifice wave after wave of young men whose idealism would swiftly vanish under "the ghastly glimmering of the guns" described by British soldier-poet Wilfred Owen.

It is an interestingly old-fashioned view of the war—part Sassoon-Owen, part "Oh What a Lovely War," and part (anachronistically) *Catch-22*—which has long since been brought into question by serious historians. But you would never know this from PBS or Jay Winter. For them the adolescent gesture of disgust with the "old fools with thick white mustaches" is preserved in amber as the paradigm, one suspects, for all military history as well as being instrumental in "the shaping of the 20th century." When the National Endowment for the Humanities—with the help of the "deluxe teacher's edition" of video cassettes of the series, the teacher's guide, and the student worksheets, all available from PBS Home Video—finally succeeds in making sure that this is the history of the century that all children learn, the subsequent history of American power in the world will be a brief and inglorious but assuredly an unromanticized one.

Editor's note: We wish to call attention to the recent publication of *A Guide to the Four-Chambered Heart*, by John Haines (Larkspur, $18), portions of which first appeared in *The New Criterion*.

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Books

After Edel

by Paul Dean

The first volume of Sheldon M. Novick's biography[1] takes Henry James's career up to the publication of *The Portrait of a Lady* in 1881, when he was thirty-eight. By then he had behind him not only *The Portrait*, the first of his novels of which one can say that it exhibits genius as distinct from high accomplishment, but also *Roderick Hudson*, *The American*, *The Europeans*, *Washington Square*, and a large number of tales best exemplified by "Daisy Miller." Physically nomadic but intellectually consistent, James had staked out his abiding theme in a magazine article of 1878:

> It is hard to say exactly what is the profit of comparing one race with another, and weighing in opposed groups the manners and customs of neighboring countries; but it is certain that as we move about the world we constantly indulge in this exercise. This is especially the case if we happen to be infected with the baleful spirit of the cosmopolite—that uncomfortable consequence of seeing many lands and feeling at home in none.

James's quest for a way of life which should unite the virtues of the old and new worlds was both lifelong and lonely. For him, as for Man in Henry Vaughan's poem of that title, "God ordered motion, but ordained no rest." Mr. Novick's observation that, "denied the possibility of completion in his own life, he lived for others, and, imaginatively, lived through them" is more damaging than he seems to realize, but it explains the eventual atrophy of James's art, the tedium and lifelessness of his so-much-vaunted last phase. It may explain, too, his destructive tinkering with his early works, in which, having run out of material, he seems to have tried to exact revenge on his younger, more vital self by ruining what he had written.

James's childhood and adolescence were passed in constant peregrinations: by his thirteenth year he had known New York, London, Paris, Geneva, and Boulogne. The reason was his father's inability to settle. ("I am not a settler," says Felix Young in *The Europeans*, "I am a European.") Henry James, Sr., does not emerge very credibly from Mr. Novick's account. His philosophy, an idiosyncratic blend of Swedenborg and Fourier, which he propagated tirelessly on the lecture platform, and in magazine articles and books, reduced religion to a branch of science, banished the numinous, scorned creeds and liturgies, and fixed its eyes on the transcendental unity of all being. He poured money into utopian communities of the kind that Hawthorne had satirized in *The Blithedale Romance*. Indeed, Bronson Alcott, who, like Hawthorne, had lived for a time on Brook Farm, mocked the elder James's air "of a man with Kingdom-come in his brain," better avoided "on pain

1 *Henry James: The Young Master*, by Sheldon M. Novick; Random House, 550 pages, $35.

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of being gobbled down." Mr. Novick has a terrifying description of him in later life, "intensely, dangerously charming," but with "something bleak and bottomless behind his eyes, something like a yearning for the embrace of white emptiness," almost like D. H. Lawrence's Gerald Crich. His constant changes of scene and direction deprived his son of a coherent education (there was a bewildering succession of schools and private tutors) or the chance to form secure friendships.

Young Henry had a wide circle of acquaintance, but only a few intimates, the closest of whom, Minny Temple, died in 1870—only to die again, in an artistically unsatisfactory manner in *The Wings of the Dove*. James was attracted to melodramatic deaths as a fictional device, but his deaths are not followed by resurrections and there is no point in trying to make his novels into religious allegories; his father's "religion," which called itself Christianity but rejected doctrine, left him spiritually bereft. He was an acquiescent son: his father prohibited him from enlisting in the army when the Civil War broke out, but he also forbade him to go to university. Invited to Oxford in 1877, he wistfully noted its "air of liberty to care for the things of the mind assured and secured by machinery which is in itself a satisfaction to sense." This he had been denied; but he was no Jude the Obscure, hanging around the college entrances in a sulk. He learned early on that his university, indeed his whole life, should be constructed inside his own head—a decision which both saved and limited him.

The temptation to make art into a religion must have been strong, and although James's essays on Flaubert, for instance, show us how far he was from sterile aestheticism, his devotion to his labors had more than a tinge of the sacerdotal. As Quentin Anderson argued years ago in *The American Henry James* (Rutgers University Press, 1957), the father's Swedenborgian system and symbolism counted for a great deal in the son's fiction, in which James can be seen wrestling with the problem of contriving an equilibrium between novel and romance, realism and symbolism—contriving, sometimes, too overtly, but also sometimes allowing the symbols to float in solution in the narrative more successfully than his mentor Hawthorne.

In the works up to and including *The Portrait*, James draws on his sojourns in America and Europe to probe the question of what constitutes "civilization." That exploration is sustained, subtle, and dialectical, and resists glib summary. England, Italy, and France all provided formative experiences. Mr. Novick is unwearying (although his reader may not be) in tracing the social round James undertook. What, however, of the inner life? Here reservations intrude. Mr. Novick has many harsh and justified things to say of Leon Edel, whose irresponsible Freudian fantasies go near to vitiating his mammoth biography: but he is not free from fantasy, or irresponsibility, himself. A certain amount of press attention has been attracted by his claim that James was sexually initiated by Oliver Wendell Holmes (the subject of Mr. Novick's previous biography) in the spring of 1865. This matter occupies two and a half of five hundred pages of text, and the case remains unproven. Mr. Novick quotes from a notebook entry of 1905 recalling James's "*initiation première*" forty years earlier in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and Ashburton Place, Boston, where the James family lived. The passage suggests an emotional, not necessarily physical, involvement, an overwhelming experience of love for an unnamed other party. The whole entry, which can be found in F. O. Mathiessen and Kenneth B. Murdock's edition of *The Notebooks of Henry James* (University of Chicago Press, 1947), does mention Holmes but in the context of his absence in England. All we can safely infer is that James was romantically attracted to someone and that that someone may have been Holmes; it is not clear that the feelings were reciprocated, still less that there was any sexual contact. Indeed, Mr.

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Novick notes that Holmes, then drinking heavily, seems to have attached little importance to his meetings with James at that time. He also cites a passage from *The Wings of the Dove*, in which Merton (whom he calls Morton) Densher recalls the first time he and Kate Croy became lovers, seeking to see in this an autobiographical reference by James.

Such a melange of fact and fiction is found elsewhere in Mr. Novick's book. He is not free from basic errors; in summarizing the plot of "Daisy Miller" he conflates the characters of Eugenio and Giovanelli. He shows that Leon Edel transferred the action of the story "Poor Richard" to James's life, where it never occurred, but he himself offers a close paraphrase of a passage in "The Pupil" as a factual account of a conversation James is said to have had, in boyhood, with one of his tutors. Novick implies that James was the object of an attempted seduction by another tutor, adducing in support the "fact" that "in *The Turn of the Screw* and 'The Pupil,' young boys die at the moment of sexual awareness, precipitated by tutors"—as though James had not engineered a triumph of obliquity to prevent us being able to say anything so definite! Again, he is confident that, in *Roderick Hudson*, Roderick, and not Mary Garland, is the real object of Rowland Mallet's passion. Yet it will not do to say that the novel is "stronger if Mary Garland is simply ignored." Admittedly, Mary is not a strongly drawn character compared to the two men. But we cannot "simply" ignore what the author chose to include in order to deter us from just such simplification. Mr. Novick's most startling psychological insight comes in a boldly metaphorical moment in his chapter on *The Portrait of a Lady*, where he tells us, "Costumed as Madame Merle, James performed his greatest impersonation." To conceive of Henry James as a drag artist is to exhibit a peculiarly infelicitous form of originality.

Later in his book, Mr. Novick refers to James's relationship with Paul Zhukovsky, the Russian painter whom he met in Paris in 1875. Again the nature of the relationship is sketchy. James described Zhukovsky as "a most *attachaut* human creature, but a lightweight and a perfect failure"—a disquietingly embittered comment. There is an anecdote of this period, told by the intermittently reliable Edmund Gosse, who claimed to have it from James himself, of James, in tears, keeping vigil on a city pavement, watching a particular lamplit window in the house opposite for the glimpse of a face which never came. Mr. Novick speculates, albeit with justified caution, that this is a memory of Zhukovsky and Paris. It recalls the seventh section of Tennyson's *In Memoriam* ("Dark house, by which once more I stand"); which should remind us that intense male friendships in the nineteenth century, not to mention the twentieth, may elude our neat sexual categories. Perhaps James provided the best comment on these matters in a letter of 1880 to Grace Norton:

> If I were to marry, I would be guilty in my own eyes of an inconsistency. . . . I am not moved to that way, because I think my opinion of life on the whole good enough. I am attached to it, I am used to it—it doesn't in any way incapacitate or paralyze me (on the contrary), and it doesn't involve any particular injustice to anyone, least of all to myself.

This says as much, and as little, as he wished us to know, biographically. We may be prompted by Mr. Novick's reminder that Paul Zhukovsky was the model for Gilbert Osmond to reread chapter 42 of *The Portrait of a Lady*, which James himself judged "obviously the best thing in the book," and follow Isabel Archer's dawning realization of the sham that is her marriage:

> Suffering, for Isabel, was an active condition; it was not a chill, a stupor, a despair; it was a passion of thought, of speculation, of response to every pressure.

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This is what makes hers such a rare and fine nature; it is also what makes her a tragic figure. The ability to make us see her in this way is what makes her creator, in turn, so rare and fine—and tragic. Perhaps one of the most impressive things about James is that, in his great moments (and this chapter is only one, in a novel full of them) he achieved an "impersonal" scrutiny of his own experiences in the full T. S. Eliot sense of that word: a sense, however, which makes simple biographical deduction perilously presumptuous.

Of course, the problem for the biographer is that, by the time James came to dictate his memoirs he could say nothing unambiguously—not even that the sun was shining, let alone that he had been in love with younger men. His homosexual leanings are not in question, but where and why these began, how he dealt with them in his life, above all how he transmuted them in his art, are more elusive matters than Mr. Novick appears to think. Mr. Novick might say that James was debarred by propriety from treating homosexuality openly in his fiction, and that with hindsight we can see what the novels are "really" about. But this pinpoints a weakness in the psychological approach to biography and criticism: the work is not to be trusted (the opposite of Lawrence's "Never trust the teller, trust the tale"), so the more explicit a meaning appears to be, the more likely it is to be misleading.

In the last resort, if justification is needed of a flat contradiction between the implications of the narrative and the preferred interpretation, the psycho-critic can always claim that the author was "in denial," sublimating the truth so deeply that it was hidden even from himself. The poems of Browning, Mr. Novick avers, "opened to Henry an understanding of what the heterosexual relation could be." A man who has to learn about sex by reading Browning is clearly in a bad way. I should like to believe James was less desperate than that.

Supreme nonfiction

Ian Hamilton Walking Possession: Essays and Reviews, 1968–1993. Addison-Wesley, 302 pages, $25

reviewed by John Simon

It is harder to review a collection of critical essays than other kinds of nonfiction. A little easier, to be sure, if you take issue with the critic; but what if you are full of admiring approbation? You end up reduced to quoting enthusiastically more and more passages, till the review becomes an anthology of quotations, a miniature commonplace book. I am not sure I can escape this predicament in reviewing Ian Hamilton's *Walking Possession: Essays and Reviews, 1968–1993*, a book I relished when I agreed with it, and respected when I didn't.

Hamilton, who is also a poet and a biographer, is probably best known for his *Robert Lowell*, an excellent critical biography, and *In Search of J. D. Salinger*, a stimulating account of what happens when a rebarbative biographee bombards the biographer with monkey wrenches. Some will also recall Hamilton's work as an editor on the *Times Literary Supplement*, and, better yet, as the editor of the short-lived but valuable *The New Review*, issues of which I am loath to part with despite dearth of space on my groaning book shelves. But anyone, familiar or not with Hamilton, will have a rattling good time with this collection whose mood is pleasantly varied, judgment consistently sound, and style incisive, lapidary, and, whenever possible, urbanely witty.

Hamilton addresses fiction, biography, poetry, various kinds of nonfiction, and the *Dictionary of National Biography* with equal ease and gusto. Those reviewed include Jean Stafford, Aldous Huxley, Stephen Spender, Sylvia Plath, George Orwell, two Amises, (K. and M.), and two Waughs (A. and E.). Also Frost, Graves, Roy Fuller, Alun Lewis, Wilbur, Merrill, Stevens, Heaney, and Damon Runyon. There are three pieces on Larkin (poems, letters, biography), and

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more specific examinations of single novels by Updike, Mailer, Roth, Terry Southern, and Julian Barnes. There are also solid pieces on a biographer's misgivings, literary hoaxes, a literary conference in Australia (a bit of a hoax, too), New York literary celebrities and their sycophants, television personalities, the life of a notorious madam, and Cyril Connolly and Tambimuttu as editors, respectively, of *Horizon* and *Poetry London*.

There is also, I am less happy to report, a final section on various sports and sports figures, which I find hard to comprehend, not only because the references and even the argot is fiercely British, but also because I can't take sports that seriously. Raised largely on Continental literature, I am used to certain kinds of idiosyncrasies—Colette on cats, Calvino on imaginary cities, Karl Kraus on the inferiority of everyone else—but not sports. Well, yes: Musil, a physical-exercise fanatic, who condignly died while exercising; and Montherlant about bullfighting, which may not be so much a sport as a perversion. And, sure, I know about Pindar, but those were other times.

England, however, is different. There the poet Edmund Blunden will write a book about cricket, and Sir Leslie Stephen will write you one on mountaineering. There are also the fox-hunting novels of Surtees, and a book-length epic poem *Cricket*, by one James Love. But never mind, I'll grant Hamilton his interest in sports if only he would keep it out of a book of literary criticism. It is quite a shock to encounter a piece entitled "Irving Scholar's Spurs," and expect to read about how some astute academic earned his spurs by unearthing new data on Washington Irving, only to find out it concerns Irving Scholar, the chairman of the Tottenham Hotspurs football club.

But back to literary matters and, to begin with, the book's title. This, as the author explains in a liminal note, refers to what happens in bankruptcy cases under English law. The bailiffs, before they can foreclose, take walking possession, i.e., only half-own your goods for a fortnight, during which you may come up with the monies owed and regain ownership. Hamilton writes: "Reviewers are sometimes thought of as the bailiffs of literature: they take walking possession of their subjects; they talk as if they owned them, but they don't." Moreover, he adds, "many of the reviews reprinted here were written in less than fourteen days and one or two of them were done on a typewriter half-owned by the courts."

This is splendid but excessive modesty. Hamilton writes with such assurance and persuasiveness that he makes his subjects thoroughly his own. But "own" in the sense of someone who, say, knows every nook and cranny of Central Park, and writes about it with a sense of involvement bordering on possessiveness, but still without denying others their rights to the park. As for the speed with which the pieces were written, what matter, if the writing has nothing shoddy or provisional about it; and who would now contest Hamilton's claim to that productive typewriter?

Let me begin with a longer quotation taken from a review of Andrew Motion's Larkin biography:

> We knew too that this poet's personality, his off-color ribaldry and slang, had been shaped in the "come-off-it" postwar years and nurtured in dreary provincial towns, in seedy digs and gas-lit libraries. We had no proof but we rather suspected that Larkin collected hardish porn, had it in for blacks and queers, was careful with his money and, when it came to relationships, too morbidly obsessed with his own failings to be much of a lover or friend. Plenty of this we were able to pick up from the poems but these were usually so well judged, as dramas or confessions, that we could speak also of a Larkinesque "persona"—a self-projection that might in part be a disguise.
>
> When Larkin died in 1985, at sixty-three, the obituaries were full of warmth; there was much talk of our "nation's loss." He was known to have gone a bit funny in his final years, falling in love with Mrs. Thatcher and

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> giving out with some reactionary comment, but all this was reckoned to be amiably bufferish, a bit of a self-parody, and somehow valuably English in its concern for old-style ways. Only a few people knew that there was nothing at all funny about the way Larkin had gone funny, that his conservatism was tinged with the same vehemence that marked his ever deepening self-hatred and despair. There was also a drink problem, a port-for-breakfast kind of drink problem. Since the death of his mother in 1977, he had stopped writing poetry, or stopped expecting to write poetry, and when he did take up his pen it was either from duty or from rage—and it was not always easy to tell which was which.

Notice, first of all, how much is crammed—effectively—into two paragraphs. You immediately see the critical biographer's interest in biography, especially as it ties in with Larkin's writing, but also, of course, in extracting from the book under review the clues to the poet's quintessential self. This self is then cogently viewed as partly a mask, but partly also the man himself.

Adroitly, Hamilton fills in the reader on the background by rehearsing things already known about Larkin to the cognoscenti—a good way of flattering the reader into thinking himself one of the initiates as one rehashes the basics. And always Hamilton makes Motion come out ahead, by allowing him the role of conclusive corroborator, confirming what was only vaguely known before. For what was known only to experts and intimates is, after all, news to the world. And Hamilton's summary is conveyed with a cleverness that partakes of wit, but transcends it into illumination couched in terse, memorable phraseology: "there was nothing at all funny about the way Larkin had gone funny," "a port-for-breakfast kind of drink problem," "self-projection that might in part be a disguise." There are fine distinctions, which lead Hamilton to emend "stopped writing poetry" to "stopped expecting to write poetry," something more piteous and self-dramatizing. Also truer. Best of all, there is the suggestive insight left a trifle unexplained: poetry written "either from duty or from rage—and it was not always easy to tell which was which." Does this mean that Larkin raged at the world to the point where it became his duty to put it in writing, or that the compulsion to write poetry made a man who would have preferred something else —something more—from life rant against his limitations? Or both? Relative uncertainty encourages us, nay compels us, to become actively involved in unriddling Philip Larkin.

To turn now to Hamilton on Seamus Heaney:

> Like Dylan Thomas, like Graves, Heaney assumed the noble vestments, but he did so with an engaging awkwardness, a persuasive lack of flourish. One of the fascinations of Heaney's work, read from the beginning until now [i.e., *The Haw Lantern*, 1987] is in observing how he shifts this way and that to find a genuinely comfortable *fit*, a non-fake, non-proud way of living in the sacred robes he knows he has the obligation and the right to wear. He can neither fling them off nor swap them for the more workaday gear which, in certain moods, he might feel more "at home in." But there is always a touch of "Why me?" in his sometimes effortful transcending of the "me," and this has given him a rare sturdiness of posture—rare, that is, for the "chosen" sort of poet he's become. Indeed, it could be said that one of Heaney's principal achievements is that he has re-dignified the bardic stance.

If my previous quotation showed off Hamilton the biographer-critic, this one displays the critic-poet. For the entire ample paragraph is taken up with one metaphor, the modern poet aware of his Irishness assuming the vestments of an ancient folk bard. The master image is gracefully pursued into various sartorial ramifications, e.g., flinging off one's ceremonial clothes or swapping them for more comfortable workaday gear. And there is the neat, poetic-epigrammatic clincher, "he has re-dignified the bardic stance," the kind of gnomic

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last line with which a lyric etches itself into the memory.

Hamilton is well aware of the limitations of the early Heaney, as in "he was a shade too youthfully delighted with the plopping, slopping, thwacking sounds of spade on soil, or milk in pail." And this allows the reviewer to prick the bubble of donnish critics who "have always loved this onomatopoeic side of Heaney, though: maybe because it gives them the chance to exhibit their own 'sensibilities'—'You'll notice how the "thwa-" of "thwack" is shyly answered by the "plu-" of "plump."'" This is my first example of Hamilton's superb sense of humor—that "shyly" is priceless—of which there will be much more to come.

That brings us to another of Hamilton's specialties, call it disputational criticism, in which points are more sharply made by introducing critical errors on the subject at hand, then resoundingly setting the record straight. Thus,

> *Field Work*, to my mind, is the book of Heaney's which we ought to keep in mind (how can we not?) when there are grumbles about "anonymity" or "suppression of the self." His "*moi*" poems are all the stronger, all the more hard won, it seems to me, not because they go against his notions of a tribal role but because—at their best—they don't: it's just that, in these poems, the "I" lurks behind the "we" and vice-versa. And the elegy is, of course, the perfect form for such lurking, or entwining: an intimacy meant to be made public.

It is most satisfying to follow the specifics of Heaney's poetry to a major statement about poetry itself: the elegy as the perfect form for making an intimacy public. There is also forceful rhetoric here: the not because of such-and-such but because of its opposite, always an effective device. And then such fine points as the significant reiteration from "my mind" to "keep in mind," from author to reader; the strengthening of "lurking" with "entwining." Noteworthy, too, is the judicious restraint in that "at their best," set off with dashes for greater emphasis.

Yet if Hamilton is fine when he is positive, he is no less so when he is negative. True, it may seem easier to score with witty putdowns, but not when these are so delicately calibrated from poker-faced irony to riproaring demolition jobs. "In the thirties, as head of the Lyrical Department of Mac Spaundey Inc. [i.e., MacNeice, Spender, Auden, and Day Lewis], Spender won high marks for being sensitively muddle-headed when all around him had made up their icy minds, and a kind of wincing bewilderment has been his trademark ever since. . . . All the most famous thirties photographs suggest that in a period of purposeful limb-discipline, of rallies and goose-steps and international brigades, Spender alone knew how to trip over his own fire-hose, and be loved for it."

About Kingsley Amis's *Memoirs* of 1991 we read: "The faint hope might have been that the old shag would come over as somewhat, shall we say, cuddlier than his public image makes him seem. To any such tender expectations, though, Amis offers here a close-to-gleeful 'In a pig's arse, friend'—i.e., you bastards will get nothing out of me, or not much, and what you do get you won't like." Perusing the new *Dictionary of National Biography*, Hamilton concludes:

> Fifty year olds with blood-pressure difficulties might scan the *DNB*'s roll-call of eminents with divided feelings: although it is cheering to note that for most of the dictionary's entrants, the age of fifty marks Stage Two in a nobly envisaged Five-Stage masterplan, it is depressing to be taught how long, how very long you have to live in order to rack up these near-superman C.V.s. In the forty-sixty age group, there is but a handful of entrants and these have mostly earned their place by compiling points in relatively vulgar, early burnout professions like publishing or pop singing. And even the sixty-seventy grouping carries a faintly sleazy air: poets, comedians, psychi-

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> atrists and the like. It is only when we pass the age of seventy that the entrants look as if they've really earned their keep.

On James Merrill's *Book of Ephraim*, we read: "Harold Bloom has said 'I don't know that [it], at least after some dozen readings, can be over-praised.' A neat way of disarming reviewers who have only had time to read the work 'some once' or at the very best 'some twice.'" Even worse is meted out to Charles Berger, one of Merrill's "more prostrate fans" whose lucubrations on the dust jacket are quoted. "What can this mean?" wonders Hamilton. "We will never know, but in the meantime it is hard to warm to a text which attracts such bovine homage."

About the quasi-autobiographical hero of Updike's *Couples*, Hamilton treats us to a racy passage from the author, then comments: "Piet, we perceive, is not as simple as he thinks he is. A man who can think such beautiful thoughts, and in such silkily alliterative cadences, has more than just ass on his high mind. Like earlier Updike heroes, Piet has the church at his back, and before him, in the distance, dim intimations of sublime apotheosis. Assisting him in his quest, he has the lush music of Prose Style. If he seeks 'ass' it is because he doesn't know where else he might seek God."

As you would expect, Norman Mailer brings out the best in Hamilton. So we learn about *Ancient Evenings* that "when Mailer locates his first bout of gay fellation in some shadowy corner of the Land of the Dead (a long-gone incumbent is spiritedly welcoming his newly-enrolled grandson) the whole effect is . . . well, so much more spooky and *theological* than if he had set it in the men's room at the Barbizon Plaza." And further: "Several times, during the Nile-long course of *Ancient Evenings*, one gets the image not of a writer writing a book but of a child contentedly playing with his toys: dressing them up, giving them funny voices, making them perform sudden, improbable acts of violence, and so on. When Mailer wishes his hero to be humiliated by a brutal Pharoah, for example, he makes his Pharoah-toy bugger the hero-toy—just like that." And still further: "There are fun and games to be had here, of course, and it is entirely in line with almost everything else in the book that Mailer should use the telepathy device mainly to keep us up to date on who is thinking of doing 'it' to whom. (Nobody, it should be said, is ever not thinking of doing it to someone.)"

Animadverting on John Carey's *The Intellectuals and the Masses*, Hamilton notes ironically, "This polemic against highbrows can the more easily be swallowed, indeed savored, because it is written by a highbrow. It is well known that John Carey reads Milton in the Latin and knows where to find *all* the dirty bits in Ovid." Or take the subtler irony in the following: "It could be said that only he who was uninterested in exploring his own personality could have *employed* that personality as usefully as Orwell did, could have—as it were—sent his whole self out into the public world with such a firm sense of the moral and political reliability of his responses."

I could go on quoting till the cows come home (which, if they knew Hamilton, they would do rather more precipitously), but will content myself with just two more samples of how well Hamilton can do with subjects not remotely connected to literature. Here he is writing on a biography of the notorious madam Cynthia Payne: "How then does Cynthia maintain this high standard of hospitality, this cheerily (and come to think of it, literally) painstaking determination to 'fix-up' her eccentric clientele? Her 'biographer' Paul Bailey clearly believes that she has the fabled 'heart of gold' . . . imaginatively caring for the wanking-wounded, the casualties of the sex war." So formidable is Cynthia that, as Hamilton estimates, "Even those who didn't want a beating would probably not have had the cheek to turn one down."

Finally, here is Hamilton describing the spectators at a typical cricket match at Lord's: "There was no one who was not

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under ten or over fifty. There were fathers with sons, the sons often bespectacled and with gigantic scorebooks on their knees; there were benign-looking pensioners, many of them accompanied by wives with thermos flasks and knitting; there were sad-faced scoutmaster types with binoculars, *Daily Telegraphs* and sandwiches that could only have been packaged by a mum no other woman had ever managed to displace."

However, lest the rest of us in the trade should die of envy at such perfection, the gods have provided Hamilton with an Achilles heel. As you may have suspected from what I have quoted so far, his grammar, syntax, spelling, and punctuation can display astounding caducity. To adduce only some of the most painful examples, consider: "His religious impulse sent him searching for a God *whom* his scientific impulse insisted must be seen face to face." Again, "One of the few 'experts' who really *does* seem to have some expertise." Also "centred *toward*," "nervously *wracked*," "*Post-war*, it was easier," "behaviour-*wise*," "stories like *this*," "*like* in the books," etc., italics, of course, mine. And there is also the irritating habit of having in one sentence four dashes, or, worse yet, three.

Still, we are likely to be more indulgent with Ian Hamilton than with a lesser man. Thus we shall not take it amiss that his criticism is limited to Anglophone literature; not every critic need be a generalist, and a job well done is a job well done. What distinguishes *Walking Possession* is that it is truly gustatory criticism in an age of all kinds of crazy critical doctrines and theories, and of political axes to grind. Here, for a change, is criticism from the brain, the heart, and the gut. So what if, in my view, Hamilton underrates Robert Graves and Richard Wilbur—he does it for reasons he valiantly defends. So what if, to my mind, he overestimates Wallace Stevens—doesn't everybody? Anyone whose criticism makes you think, laugh, and eagerly turn the pages deserves a raised hat, even in this bleak midwinter inimical to our pates.

A see of troubles

Diarmaid MacCulloch
Thomas Cranmer: A Life.
Yale University Press, 692 pages, $35

reviewed by Marc M. Arkin

On March 21, 1556, in the third year of the reign of Queen Mary, Thomas Cranmer, late archbishop of Canterbury and Primate of All England, then sixty-seven years old, prepared to preach his last sermon. He had spent the early morning reciting the litany, tending to personal business, and signing some fourteen additional copies of his sixth recantation of his evangelical faith. Then, flanked by two Spanish Dominican friars, one of them the recently appointed Regius Professor of Divinity, he made his way to the University Church at Oxford. It was rainy; otherwise, much of the ceremony would have taken place outdoors, in front of Balliol College, where the day's events were to conclude.

Inside the sanctuary, the assembled dignitaries first heard a sermon by Dr. Henry Cole, provost of Eton, explaining why it was entirely proper under canon law that a repentant sinner should be burned at the stake. Cranmer spoke next. He began conventionally: he requested prayers for his sins; he discussed three forms of love; he pled with the rich to avoid covetousness; he wept as he described how the poor were starving as food prices soared. Only then did he come to the heart of the matter, "the great thing which so much troubleth my conscience."

And, departing from his prepared text, Cranmer explained, this "great thing" was "my sending abroad of writings contrary to truth which here now I renounce and refuse as things written with my hand contrary to the truth which I thought in my heart, written for fear of death, and for as much as my hand offended in writing contrary to my heart, it shall be first burned." His next words were almost swallowed in the commotion: "And, as for the Pope, I refuse him

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as Christ's enemy and Antichrist, with all his false doctrine." As he called out a parting shot for the Eucharistic theology of his old enemy, the bishop of Winchester, the outraged authorities pulled Cranmer from the pulpit, an image immortalized for generations of Protestants in Foxe's *Acts and Monuments*, also known as the "Book of Martyrs."

Cranmer was hustled through the streets of Oxford, trailed all the way by a dazed Dominican friar—probably the Regius Professor—who kept repeating, "*Non fecisti*?" ("You didn't do it?"). Asked point blank if he would have declared the pope to be head of the church if it would have saved his life, Cranmer, astonishingly, admitted as much. At the stake, nevertheless, Cranmer made good on his promise: he held his right hand in the flames until it was consumed. Only then, reciting the words of Saint Stephen, the first Christian martyr, did he give up the ghost. Tradition records that his heart was found unburnt among the ashes.

Here, by most reckonings, was a man whose death became him better than his life. Born in 1489, to the Nottinghamshire squirearchy, Cranmer spent a quarter century in residence at Cambridge without attaining any fame beyond his fellowship at Jesus College. About 1515, he married obscurely, but, soon after, his wife died in childbirth. In 1520, he was ordained priest; six years later he became doctor of divinity, specializing in scriptural studies.

By 1527, however, Cranmer began to move on the periphery of the Henrician court, having somehow caught the eye of Henry VIII's great minister, Cardinal Wolsey. There were a few diplomatic missions, a personal meeting with the king himself, and, in 1529, a move to prominence when Henry seized on Cranmer's suggestion that the king's Great Matter—the divorce from Catherine of Aragon—should be settled by academic theologians rather than by canon lawyers. Entering the royal service, Cranmer traveled to the continent and helped canvass the Italian universities. Returning to England, he attached himself to the religiously progressive Boleyn household. Then, in 1532, while in Nuremburg on an embassy to the emperor, Cranmer did something odd for a conventionally ambitious middle-aged diplomat under a vow of celibacy: he married the niece of a prominent Lutheran divine.

Meanwhile, Cranmer continued his rise to power fueled by the king's marital situation. Within months, Henry recalled Cranmer, announcing his intention to make him archbishop of Canterbury. Whatever reservations Cranmer may have harbored about the papacy—or other matters of Roman doctrine—he accepted his office from the hands of Pope Clement and immediately set upon the work for which Henry appointed him. Consecrated on March 30, 1533, he formally annulled Henry's marriage to Catherine on May 23; on June 1, he officiated at Anne's coronation; in early September, he stood as godfather to the newborn princess Elizabeth.

By the time the dust cleared at the end of 1534, England had a national church with the king at its head, a reformation accomplished by a series of parliamentary acts. What England did not yet have was a reformation in theology or worship. During the next twenty years, Cranmer would attempt to achieve that second reformation by resort to the authority that had so effectively engineered the first, the crown in parliament.

For the remainder of Henry's reign, Cranmer managed, sometimes with difficulty, to navigate the murky waters of the king's shifting religious policies, diplomatic initiatives, and marital affairs. Thus, Cranmer weathered the fall of his patron Anne Boleyn (1536); the traditionalist rebellion known as the Pilgrimmage of Grace (1536–37); the fall of his ally Thomas Cromwell (1540); and an effort to try him for heresy, known as the Prebendaries Plot (1543). At the same time, Cranmer managed to keep ahead of the king's alternating overtures to the Lutheran Schmalkaldic League and the Catholic powers of the Holy Roman Em-

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pire, overtures routinely reflected in the public worship of the Henrician church.

Such survival comes at a price. Despite his personal misgivings over Anne Boleyn's fate, two days before her execution, Cranmer annulled her marriage to Henry; on the day Anne died, he signed a dispensation from prohibitions of affinity for the king's marriage to Jane Seymour. Although Cranmer wrote Henry a letter in defense of the imprisoned Thomas Cromwell, as a member of the House of Lords, he dutifully voted Cromwell's attainder. Shortly after, he annulled Henry's ill-fated marriage to Anne of Cleves, support for which had led to Cromwell's downfall. In 1539, a moment of diplomatic retrenchment, Cranmer acceded to the traditionalist Six Articles, which among other things, reaffirmed clerical celibacy and punished with death any denial of the real presence in the Eucharist. Latimer resigned his diocese; Cranmer, in contrast, sent his wife and children back to the continent. In 1543, during another traditionalist phase in Henry's policies, Cranmer edited the so-called "King's Book," bestowing on it his own inimitable prose style, even as the text rejected the bedrock evangelical doctrine of justification by faith alone and placed restrictions on lay Bible reading, previously one of Cranmer's cherished causes.

At Henry's death in 1547, Cranmer was, nonetheless, an established member of the evangelical camp. On the accession of the more sympathetic—or malleable—Edward, Cranmer began to move the English church further from the Roman rite. During Edward's reign, the Book of Common Prayer appeared in two versions, both primarily from Cranmer's pen. The 1549 version, under the Somerset protectorate, retained features of the Mass, preserving prayers for the dead and a Eucharist that offered, "the body of our Lord Jesus Christ which was given for thee preserve thy body and soul unto everlasting life." By 1552, the revised prayer book, under the Northumberland protectorate, was radically different: prayers for the dead were expunged, vestments were limited, the priest became a minister, the altar a table, the Eucharist a Lord's Supper taken in remembrance and fed on in the heart by faith with thanksgiving. A year later Edward was dead and the devoutly Roman Catholic Mary was on the throne.

Having used the powers of his office to pronounce Mary illegitimate, Cranmer had little to expect from the new regime. What is more, he had actively participated in the effort to settle the succession on Lady Jane Grey, the Protestant granddaughter of Henry VIII's sister. (MacCulloch himself takes the somewhat novel position that Mary was a usurper who staged a coup d'etat against the legitimate government of Queen Jane.) In September 1553, he sealed his fate by openly protesting Mary's restoration of the Mass, claiming that the 1552 prayer book, with its parliamentary approval, was the only legitimate usage. In November, he was convicted of treason for his support of Queen Jane. The Marian government devoted the next two and a half years to the convoluted procedures necessary to obtain Cranmer's formal papal condemnation for heresy.

In October, 1555, with the condemnation nearly complete, Cranmer witnessed his fellow bishops, Nicholas Ridley and Hugh Latimer, burned at the stake. Shaken, isolated, in ill health, and under tremendous pressure from the Marian regime, between December and March, Cranmer signed no less than six different recantations of his evangelical views. He accepted sacramental absolution, was reconciled to the church of Rome, began attending Mass, and participated in the Candlemas ceremonies that he had vehemently condemned only a few years earlier. Inexplicably, he executed one more *volte face* on the day of his execution, reaffirming his evangelical principles and earning his place in Foxe's Book of Martyrs.

This, clearly, is no simple saint. In his play *Henry VIII*, Shakespeare preserved the tradition of Cranmer as a kindly man, a cour-

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tier devoted to the Tudor monarchy, who survived through the personal favor of the king. Other sources, perhaps less charitable, fostered the rumor that, until Edward was on the throne, Cranmer carried his intermittently inconvenient wife about with him in a trunk. It is the thesis of Diarmaid MacCulloch's magisterial—and decidedly partisan—biography of Archbishop Cranmer that, most, if not all, of the archbishop's tangled history can be explained by two factors: his unfaltering belief in royal supremacy and his evolving commitment to evangelical Christianity within the bounds of a national church. When Mary came to power, Cranmer's faith in royal supremacy could no longer coexist with his belief in a reformed national church. The resulting dissonance, in part, explains his last tormented months.

Mr. MacCulloch, a fellow of St. Cross College and lecturer in church history in the theology faculty at Oxford, painstakingly reconstructs the evolution of Cranmer's religious views. Based on Cranmer's handwritten textual marginalia, MacCulloch persuasively argues that, contrary to received wisdom, Cranmer was relatively conservative during his Cambridge years. Instead of joining the evangelical circle at the White Horse Tavern, he remained a biblical humanist in the mold of Erasmus with conciliarist leanings and outright hostility to Luther.

Exposed to the cosmopolitan world of diplomacy and continental reformers, Cranmer became a moderate evangelical with Lutheran leanings, a position he maintained throughout King Henry's reign. He favored ending medieval cultic practices, replacing the Mass with vernacular worship, and making an English Bible available to the laity. By Edward's accession in 1547, however, MacCulloch argues, Cranmer had reached a more radical Protestant stance, closer perhaps to Calvin than to Luther. In particular, as MacCulloch details, Cranmer's Eucharistic theology moved from transubstantiation in his early years to true presence during most of Henry's reign, finally coming to rest in the belief in symbolic presence that appears in the 1552 prayer book. No wonder Cranmer's papal interrogators were able to shake the archbishop by quoting Cranmer against Cranmer.

MacCulloch has given us an extraordinary biography of Archbishop Cranmer and, with him, of the English Reformation. Impeccably researched, with absolute mastery of an overwhelming body of source material and subsequent scholarship, engagingly written, the book is a remarkable achievement. However, this is not simply a book, it is an undertaking. At over six hundred close-set pages—almost seven hundred, counting appendices and the admirably exhaustive index—it follows the intricate doings of the English Reformation at ground-level detail. From the opening chapter, which traces Cranmer's family background and status consciousness from the changing heraldry of his seals, it is a model of that kind of intimate and leisurely English ecclesiastical history in which (quite literally) every bit of the landscape is known to the writer—and, presumably, to the audience as well.

This is a world of symbol and nuance. When Cranmer adopted the Lutheran numbering of the decalogue, according to MacCulloch, he set the stage for the destruction of images in the later English church. At the death of Henry, Cranmer signified his evangelical allegiance by growing a beard; Roman Catholic clerics were clean shaven. The liturgical reforms of 1548 required the clergy to break the bread during communion, paving the way for the doctrine of symbolic presence.

One of the virtues of MacCulloch's detailed approach is its cumulative picture of a medieval world perched on the cusp of the modern. The Christian Mass occupies the liminal space between living and dead, providing communication between the two. The executive arm of government is an extension of the king's private household, assisted by the households of powerful clerics, all of whom subsist on the tangible fruits of

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personal loyalty. The church and its devotions are entwined with the government in a way more reminiscent of the state cults of the late Roman Empire a thousand years earlier than of England a mere two hundred years later, which had become the world of Hobbes, Locke, and Hume.

As Doctor Johnson famously said of *Paradise Lost*, no one ever wished it a line longer, and it seems churlish to complain of omissions in a work of this length and depth. Nevertheless, there are one or two curious lacunae in the account. Although MacCulloch repeatedly stresses that Cranmer—primarily through his liturgies—played a central role in the development of the English language, he never particularizes this assertion, apparently assuming the reader's familiarity with the text of the Book of Common Prayer and the changes it effected in English usage.

Moreover, despite MacCulloch's best efforts, Cranmer himself remains a bit of a cipher. Although this may reflect the limitations of the surviving source material, apart from his close relationship with Henry, Cranmer's personal life is largely unexplored. More important, the book yields no clear sense of the origins of Cranmer's evangelical feelings or their depth. The most significant glimpse into Cranmer's inner life comes in MacCulloch's description of the archbishop's final months. There, he seems to hint that Cranmer drew his religious convictions from his friends and associates; alone, he could not maintain his evangelical faith.

Perhaps this is why Cranmer remains so perplexing, a medieval prince bishop thrust into the Reformation. It is certainly why it is tempting to say that the proper epitaph for Cranmer is the one Shakespeare put, instead, into the mouth of a predecessor in the see of Canterbury, Cardinal Wolsey, disgraced for failing to secure the king's divorce: "Had I but serv'd my God with half the zeal/ I serv'd my king, he would not in mine age/ have left me naked to mine enemies."

Curioser & curioser

Jane W. Stedman W. S. Gilbert: A Classic Victorian and His Theatre. Oxford University Press, 374 pages, $30

Ian Bradley, editor The Complete Annotated Gilbert and Sullivan. Oxford University Press, 1,197 pages, $39.95

reviewed by X. J. Kennedy

The obstinately long-lived popularity of Gilbert and Sullivan's light operas has often been called a symptom of our nostalgia for things Victorian—and so Ian Bradley calls it in his massive new compilation. We crave, it is claimed, a simpler age: a time of innocence (for which read "asexuality" and "fun poked at slant-eyed foreigners"). All I can say is God help the historian who looks to *H.M.S. Pinafore* or *The Mikado* for precise reflections of their times. Gilbert, the deviser of plots for the Savoy operas, habitually viewed his times in a distorting mirror as grotesque as Lewis Carroll's vision of Wonderland. Exaggerating the absurdities of Victorian Britain, he rendered them curioser and curioser.

And so *Patience* creates a far more precious and affected aesthetic movement than Oscar Wilde and the Pre-Raphaelites ever embodied in person. (Indeed, it was Gilbert's business partner Richard D'Oyly Carte who sent Wilde on his tour of American mining camps, a tour meant as advance advertising for the opera.) Gilbert's penchant for caricature may be seen in those Savoy operas that turn England inside-out. In *Iolanthe*, Strephon, whom the Fairy Queen has made a leader of both Tories and Liberals, calls for a competitive examination to select peers, and thus revolutionize the House of Lords by strengthening its brainpower. In another *bouleversement*, the Pirates of Penzance are portrayed as upright and virtuous; the rest of the world, corruptible.

Throughout his career, as a critic summed

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it up in 1888, Gilbert strove to pierce the "pachydermatous hide" of British philistinism. The son of a humanist and reformer, he wrote a number of bleeding-heart problem plays about impoverished victims of the judicial system and virtuous, if fallen, women condemned by a hypocritical society. The Savoy operas abound in satire of recognizable types: *The Pirates of Penzance* twits incompetent public officials; *H.M.S. Pinafore* pokes fun at the First Lord of the Admiralty, raised to his exalted post by his skill at polishing the handle of the big front door. Over and over, Gilbert complained about the inequality of rich and poor in courts of law. This was the theme of his last successful play, *The Hooligan*. Still, for much of his life he belonged to a Tory club and lived the life of a country squire.

His collaborations with Sullivan add up to only a slim fraction of Gilbert's output. He churned out fiction, tragedies, burlesques, pantomimes, adaptations of French farces (with sex replaced by politics). Even at the height of the great team's popularity, Gilbert collaborated with other composers. He produced journalism, pamphlets, and books for children. For *Fun*, the rival of *Punch*, he emitted light verse galore. Collected as *The Bab Ballads*, it came illustrated with grotesque, scratchy cartoons from Gilbert's own hand.

Despite all this productivity, there have been few contemporary devotees of Gilbert without Sullivan. Gilbert has been less fortunate than his composer partner. Much of Sullivan's chamber music and his orchestral and symphonic work remain alive, not to mention his unkillable hymn-tunes (among them "Onward, Christian Soldiers"). Alas, poor Gilbert—even *The Bab Ballads* hardly remains a hot literary property, though I suspect it might make a far more engaging musical than the dismal *Cats*, so glumly inspired by T. S. Eliot. In his skits for the popular stage, Gilbert perfected his skills as a word juggler, tossing off such masterpieces as the line "In my chilly chalet shilly shallying" as early as 1867. He could fill in the lines to a song at top speed, after he had a plot blocked out, and his talent burned brightly to the end. In *His Excellency*, a forgotten late opera written to music by Osmond Carr, a company of hussars is ordered to behave like ballet dancers:

> Never was seen such tawdry trickery:
> Soldiers, tough as oak or hickory,
> Turned to votaries of Terpsichore.

Yet for all his colossal verbal skill and his prodigious industry, Gilbert might be a merely academic name today were it not for Sullivan. By blending Gilbert's verbal tomfoolery with infectious tunes and brilliant orchestrations, Sullivan carried Gilbert to a peak of Parnassus he might otherwise have quickly slipped from, or never attained. His skill helped to obscure the fact that the last Savoy operas—*Utopia Limited, The Grand Duke*—were so largely involved in multiple plots as to lose focus.

That as time went on the two men quarreled seems inevitable. Gilbert's cantankerousness grated on the sensitive Sullivan. Both were proud craftsmen, and set themselves lofty standards. Gilbert loved ghosts; Sullivan didn't, and wrote spooky music that set Gilbert's teeth on edge. Sullivan once complained to Carte that for years he had been a mere cipher in the team, that in Gilbert's domineering rehearsals of the chorus, his music had been "cruelly murdered." He had wearied of clockwork buffoons and improbable plots. He yearned to do grand opera "where words are to suggest music, not to govern it." Gilbert, too, longed to do serious work on his own—as his problem plays, mostly flops, make clear. And yet the two were drawn back again and again to collaborating, for Sullivan had a mistress to keep, and Gilbert a yacht, a country estate, and a wife who entertained lavishly. With other collaborators, neither could attain the artistic and box-office success of *Pinafore* or *The Mikado*, although Sullivan's early musical extravaganza *Cox and Box*, with libretto by F. C. Burnand, did all right. We have the impresario Richard

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D'Oyly Carte to credit with reconciling them again and again. When it cohered, their mutual art could go deep. In their masterpiece, *The Yeomen of the Guard*, the clown-hero Jack Point either dies or swoons in despair at the final curtain—Gilbert leaves it up to the audience to choose. Staged with tact, Jack's crushing defeat is a moment of tremendous poignancy.

As Jane W. Stedman's new biography reveals, Gilbert's energetic career spanned several areas of Victorian society. In early life he was a barrister, in late life a magistrate; he spent time as a clerk in the civil service; he became a lieutenant in the Royal Aberdeenshire Militia and a news correspondent during the Franco-Prussian war. His contributions to the modern stage loom large. By 1879 he had made himself the leading playwright of his era, and if Stedman is correct, developed the acting technique of playing comic roles soberly. (Could no earlier actor or director have thought to crack jokes with a straight face? But surely Gilbert's penchant for populating a stage with characters unaware of their own absurdity helped to bring to fruition *The Importance of Being Earnest*.) For years Gilbert protested against the censorial shears of the Lord Chamberlain's Examiner of Plays, who at the height of his power could forbid references to the royal family, public officials, and Biblical persons, and eliminate any trace of sexuality. Nevertheless, Gilbert broke new ground in admitting dangerous subject matter: the fallen woman, the sexual double standard.

He proved himself a superb actor and director. At rehearsals he would act out a part, just the way he wanted it performed, and woe to the thespian who willfully strayed from the text. When he made his fortune, he built the Garrick Theatre. He was the first established playwright of his day to supply a play to a music hall. And as a playwright Gilbert succeeded in gaining dominion over his actors and producers, thus opening the way for the all-powerful and demanding Bernard Shaw. Annoyed at having inferior lyrics by other hands inserted in his early burlesque sketches, Gilbert fought and won. Perhaps emboldened by being a barrister himself, he often resorted to the law to gain his ends. He once sued an actress who had reneged on a contract, and, after a falling out over the cost of carpets for the Savoy Theatre, sued his partner Richard D'Oyly Carte. Gilbert must be among the most litigious writers in history. Although at times a sentimental softy, he was usually a hard-skinned pincher of pennies. Tough as he was, he survived and thrived in an era of riotous audiences and critics quicker to jeer than to cheer.

Stedman, an emeritus professor from Roosevelt University, seems to have digested Gilbert's whole output with cast-iron bowels. As she notes with clear satisfaction, she has produced a fuller and more factually reliable life of Gilbert than Hesketh Pearson's of 1957, if, I would say, at some cost to readability. Stedman seems never quite sure of what matters. Gilbert's unlisted phone number is at last disclosed, also the exact amount of change in a purse snatched from his country house. After detailing Gilbert's untimely death by drowning while trying to rescue a screaming but not really endangered teenage girl, Stedman records the diet of his widow: "She, too, liked fruit and insisted on having it sent when she went on holiday. 'Oh, those peaches again!' exclaimed her gardener." But perhaps, after acquaintance with a writer who exulted in trivia, such an attitude was bound to rub off.

To her credit, Stedman has cleared away a good deal of idle rumor, and she won't swear to a fact she can't document. At what spiritual expense did the two geniuses keep making up and collaborating against their independent wills? She refrains from much speculation. Was Gilbert a covert lecher? No evidence for the accusation exists, despite his penchant for taking budding divas under his wing, and the meaning of the little *x*'s with which he peppered his secret diary—denoting assignations?—remains a mystery. Generously, Stedman appears fond

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of the man, for all Gilbert's short-fused temper. She would make a fine advocate for him at the bar of the Last Judgment.

Not surprisingly, out of all Gilbert's writings, the hornets of annotation seem to have swarmed only upon the thirteen Savoy operas still performed today. *The Complete and Annotated Gilbert and Sullivan* omits their very first effort, *Thespis*, for which only parts of the music survive. Ian Bradley, a Scottish clergyman, has done a loving job. He has turned up such delectable trivia as a letter from Lewis Carroll piously complaining about the word "damme" in *Pinafore*; he reveals the targets of Gilbert's parodic thrusts; and he details some practical jokes that Savoy actors played on one another, such as that of placing a fifty-six-pound stage weight in Nanki-Poo's bundle of belongings just before a leading tenor tried to shoulder it. Of particular value are the texts to songs dropped from the Savoy productions, and concise introductions to each opera, setting forth sources and summing up how the work went over in its time.

The present book enlarges, corrects, and professes to complete Bradley's earlier *Annotated Gilbert and Sullivan*; however, the facing pages contain enough blank space to hint that aspirations toward absolute completeness are still possible. Meanwhile, with Gilbert's text on the right-hand pages and Bradley's notes on the left, the new tome is already too stout to hold comfortably. But it will supply a good desk-top browse, and it will make an ideal missile to hurl, the next time you go to an amateur production of *Iolanthe*.

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Notebook

New York's library in cyberspace

by Francis Morrone

Liber. Librarius. Libraria. Librarium. Book. Pertaining to books. Bookshop. Library. Is it any wonder that what we used to call "libraries" are now being called, in yet another instance of late-twentieth-century tin-eared bureaucratese, "information centers"?

My etymological maunderings have been prompted by the giddy adulation, all across the media, of the New York Public Library's new hundred-million-dollar Science, Industry, and Business Library, which opened this past summer. SIBL, as it is called (pronounced "sibyl"), is, if the media hype is to be believed, the Alexandrian library of the twenty-first century. Why, it's so up-to-date that it is scarcely a library at all—scarcely an icky, antediluvian "museum of compressed wood pulp," as one eminent "futurist," a columnist for *Library Journal*, has put it. And this is cause for glee. Al Gore and Newt Gingrich say so.

New York has long taken justifiable pride in its museums of compressed wood pulp. The New York Public Library has, since the completion in 1911 of its main edifice on Fifth Avenue, been the veritable lifeblood of intellectual New York. In the Carnegie branches spotted about the boroughs, as well as in the hallowed hall of the Main Reading Room, countless New Yorkers, young and old, native and immigrant, have plied the compressed wood pulp to see what it might yield—in the way of pointers to a better life, in the way of a richer understanding of experience, in the way of breakthroughs in scholarship. It is easy to get sentimental when talking about the New York Public Library. And the futurists hate nothing more than sentimentalism.

When the New York Public Library's central research facility was opened, on May 23, 1911, it was the most sumptuous edifice ever erected in New York, the stately symbol of the classical ideal of the city as an instrument to foster the innately and peculiarly human capacity to learn.

As a city, New York is a crosshatched congeries of thoroughfares and byways, an anti-hierarchical "horror of non-relation," in the words of the late English architectural critic Ian Nairn. Yet if the city can be said in any respect to possess a focal edifice, then surely it is the Public Library building on Fifth Avenue. It stands monumentally in one of the most densely trafficked parts of town. It commands an axial vista—such a rarity in New York. E. C. Potter's lumbering lions—named "Patience" and "Fortitude" by Mayor La Guardia—are reassuringly familiar presences even to those viewing them for the first time. And the building itself is one of our country's finest examples of Beaux-Arts design. It is no stylistic *retardataire*, as some modernist critics might have us believe. Rather, the building's architects, John Carrère and Thomas Hastings, gave us equal measures of Jacques-Ange Gabriel and Henri Labrouste, and a building which for all the ornateness of its symbolic program is also strikingly modern. It is, as

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much as any building in New York can be said to be, an architectural masterpiece.

It was an era in which hoi polloi were routinely treated to heavenly visions. Public libraries, railroad stations, post offices, savings banks, firehouses—each of these building types, serving the average New Yorker, was a "people's palace" which, in materials and craftsmanship, was beyond the dreams of Suleiman or Lorenzo the Magnificent. The echoing marble halls and the gilt ornament would, in short order, become the object of scorn and ridicule. Yet even so modernist a critic as Lewis Mumford could, reflecting from his eighties, scarcely contain his sentimental approbation of the ornate room in which he first read the books that taught him to hate ornate rooms. Mumford is, I think, worth quoting at length on this subject:

> I began to use the great central library on Fifth Avenue in 1912, shortly after it was opened, and I have memories of its original space and amplitude, its bright marbled freshness, the soul-filling silence that once pervaded its halls, the sense of a building lifted above the rush, the congestion, the pressures of the teeming city outside. . . . If the decoration was a too sedulous mixture of classical motifs, with such atavistic features as lions' heads spouting water for a drinking fountain . . . my reproaches even on this score would not be too heavy; for I can remember what a blessed relief it was, after an hour of close reading, to lean back in my chair and pick out some intricate figure on the ceiling, so much better than a blank space or a spot on the plaster, on which to rest my eyes: indeed, there was a nude girl, whose beautiful trunk tapered into a leafy scroll design, who became a sort of platonic mistress and sometimes served as the center of my still youthful erotic dreams.[1]

Mumford, Philip Rahv, and other New York intellectuals who never finished or never attended college have written of how the library on Fifth Avenue was where they educated themselves. In the years of the Great Depression, when use of the Fifth Avenue facility was at an all-time high, it was popularly known as the "People's University."

Half a century later, the "futurists" Edward Feigenbaum and Pamela McCorduck made this remarkable observation:

> Libraries of today are warehouses for passive objects. The books and journals sit on shelves waiting for us to use our intelligence to find them, read them, interpret them, and finally, make them divulge their stored knowledge.

The prophets and progressives advocate a new kind of "library": one in which there are no "passive objects," i.e., books. Apropos the repository of passive objects, MIT's artificial-intelligence guru Marvin Minsky (one of the most popular college professors in the country, for those of you who are not hip) had this to say: "Can you imagine that they used to have libraries where the books didn't talk to each other?"

Because of the goofy notions of such men as Minsky and his MIT colleague Nicholas Negroponte, who is on record as saying he has never much cared for books, the "digitizing" (another of those newspeak coinages) of our library collections proceeds apace. And what is more, library patrons are being encouraged and conditioned to seek their information via electronic sources. In the nomenclature of one supremely trend-mongering magazine dedicated to the "digital lifestyle," compressed wood pulp is tired; electronic databases are wired.

Nothing in America today stands as more of a symbol of the future prospects of our public libraries than SIBL. The central research library has long been in the very necessary habit of dispersing its specialized collections to other locations. Thus, the music and drama collections are housed at the Library for the Performing Arts, part of the Lincoln Center complex. Collections relating to the African-American experience

1 See *Sketches from Life: The Autobiography of Lewis Mumford. The Early Years* (The Dial Press, 1982).

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have been shunted uptown, to Harlem, to the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. And so on. SIBL involves the dispersal of the collections concerning science, industry, and business. The keynote among users of these collections has always been rapid access to up-to-the-minute data. And so it seemed that here was the library's ideal opportunity to take a national lead in providing "digital" access via personal computers attached to data-exchange networks. On the face of it, it seems unobjectionable enough. Scratch just a little deeper, however, and all sorts of problems emerge.

SIBL is housed in a portion of a somberly beautiful building, faced in luscious French limestone, which once was home to the venerable B. Altman & Co. department store. Altman's withered, like so many old department stores, in the boutique-crazed 1980s. After the building lay fallow for a few years, SIBL decided to make it its new home. (Another portion is occupied by offices of Oxford University Press, while the bulk of the building will soon be welcoming its new tenant, the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. The State of New York has christened the renovated department store the "Altman Advanced Learning Superblock.")

In years past, one might have seen a small group of middle-aged women standing at the door of Altman's early in the morning, waiting for the store to open. Today, one sees slightly larger, more diverse groups congregated at the entrance to SIBL, waiting to get in to jockey for computer time. For although SIBL houses over a million books, it is the sixty computer workstations in the "Electronic Information Center," on the lower level, that has made SIBL "a cultural happening," as one nose-ringed twenty-year-old told Margaret Scott of *The Wall Street Journal*.

The public spaces of SIBL are arrayed on two floors—street level and basement level. One enters off Madison Avenue (the rear of the department store) into a feeble 1990s stab at a grand foyer. The architects were Gwathmey Siegel & Associates, a firm occasionally capable of subtle and refined architectural statements, but given far more often to the production of buildings that look like they fell off the hardware-store shelf. The dominant note of SIBL's architecture is tinny. Followed by mean. The lower level, where the action is, has depressingly low ceilings, contributing to one's overall sense of being cramped—the polar opposite of the generous spatiality of Carrère & Hastings's masterpiece. Perhaps when one's spatial horizons are delimited by the view into a computer monitor it simply does not matter what one's surroundings are like. And as one traverses the metallic spaces of SIBL, one indeed notices that those seated before the monitors gaze with intentness, indeed rapture, into their cybernetic realm.

What's the problem with this picture? For starters, our "digitized" databases are as mean as SIBL's architecture. This surprises many people, although I cannot quite figure out why. Do people suppose that data just magically appears in software form? Well, perhaps a great portion of newly produced data does get put into digital form from the outset. But older data—the sort in which libraries have traditionally specialized—requires "inputting," being keyed or scanned into databases. The people hired to do the keying and scanning are often minimum-wage workers (and there will now probably be fewer of them) with no ultimate stake in the accuracy of their work. So the stuff that gets inputted is often ridden with typos. (Scanning does not solve this problem, since Optical Character Recognition software is not 100 percent accurate.)

And then there is the 99 percent of all the stuff out there that has not been inputted, and probably never will be. There are not enough man-hours available to digitize the entire Public Library. And even if there were, there are little issues like copyright protection that are far from being adequately worked out. In our lifetime we will not see anything like a fully digitized library.

And a good thing, too: it's unarchival. Not that the electronic records are going to

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deteriorate. The electronic records themselves will probably outlast most books. It is the means of accessing these records that become obsolete—with frightening rapidity. The distinguished planetary astronomer and digital apostate Clifford Stoll gets to the heart of this issue. Suppose, he says, that Caliph Omar had not destroyed the library at Alexandria. Suppose all those cylindrical scrolls had been preserved through the centuries. We would still be able to read them! (And what a story they would tell—it would put the author of *Black Athena*, Martin Bernal, out of business.) Stoll then reminds us that no new computer being sold today has the capability of reading eight-inch CP/M disks . . . from the 1980s. The computer marketing juggernaut is bound to put institutions like libraries in a terrible bind, as they will be forced constantly to upgrade hardware just to keep pace with new record formats.

How long will it be before electronic databases come to be relied upon by students and scholars as their principal sources of information? Before "knowledge" becomes that which is contained in these databases?

We are told many times each day that we live in the "information society." Alvin Toffler says it is the "Third Wave" of the progress of civilization, following agricultural society and industrial society. Newt Gingrich dreams of tax credits to place portable computers in the laps of underprivileged children. In his acceptance speech at the Democratic National Convention, President Clinton said one of his goals was to have a computer on every schoolchild's desk by the year 2000. And on and on and on, we are exhorted to get with the information program.

We are told that information streams at us through the cathode-ray monitors of computer workstations. "Bits" is the word information scientists have coined—it means "binary units"—to measure data flow. And sure enough, bit by bit our libraries are being eaten alive by electronic databases and by the Internet. Digital information is seductive. Often it is in "multimedia" form, with images and sounds accompanying the text, which is usually "hyperlinked," meaning that by clicking one's mouse on key words or symbols, one is instantly transported to a cross-referenced page or passage in the same or another document. This lends to research the visceral satisfactions of playing video games. And let us not discount the sheer novelty of the medium. Books have been around for centuries. How could they possibly have anything to offer our brave new world?

Could it be that "information" is the most overrated commodity on the planet today? The educator Mortimer Adler has long liked to speak of a hierarchy of learning, beginning with information, moving on to knowledge, thence to understanding, thence to wisdom. To place Adler's hierarchy in the more fashionable terms of information theory, we could actually say that knowledge involves a reduction, not an increase, in information; and that, by extension, understanding and wisdom mark further reductions in information. According to information theory, as between the Gettysburg Address and a string of nonsense characters containing exactly the same number of bits, the latter can actually be said to contain more "information," being higher in entropy or randomness. When we speak of information, then, digital or otherwise, we speak of more or less random bits. Knowledge is the sculpture chiseled from the stone mass of information, as understanding is chiseled of knowledge, and wisdom of understanding.

We hear from the media of the "information economy" and of the "knowledge economy." Are we to infer, listening to cybernetics proselytizers, that in our "knowledge economy" we are producing and making use of more intelligent, educated men and women than before? I suspect many "educated" people believe this to be so. I feel sorry for them, because anyone who believes this is someone who has never ex-

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perienced the profound joy of the greatest literature, art, or music. I wonder, indeed, if someone who believes this has ever experienced the profound joy of holding a book, turning its paper pages, and tracking with his eyes the inked symbols representing an amazingly intricate, codified means of expressing something which has been molded of pure information by discarding whole huge chunks of detritus. Nicholas Negroponte says we are moving from an atom-based culture to a bit-based culture. Seems to me this is a step backward, at least in terms of Mortimer Adler's hierarchy of learning.

For my own part, I would like to say that I am no Luddite. I have nothing against technology per se. And as for computers—well, I love them. I own and use several; I am involved in "online communities"; and I spend inordinate amounts of my time engrossed in what I feel to be the intellectually stimulating pursuits of tinkering with computer hardware and software. But I see abuses of this magnificent instrument we call the personal computer. And these abuses amount to nothing less than an assault on much of what we have long thought of as civilization itself. And it is not even as though we are experiencing unintended consequences. The "digerati" are quite outspoken about their desire to sink civilization. It is an open conspiracy. The libraries are buying into it.

The fear is not that we will end up with bookless libraries. That's unlikely. But the trend toward computerized databases will continue to grow from within like a cancer, as libraries and librarians become ever more adept at providing quick, facile, low-quality information and as the public clamors to have its informational appetites sated by such pabulum.

On the recently launched MSNBC cable-TV news network, a much-touted joint venture of NBC and Microsoft, the "Internet correspondents" (who look like, and for all I know may be, college students), demonstrate and provide critiques of World Wide Web sites. In an invariable, mantralike manner, the correspondents tell us that such and such a Web site contains "anything you want to know" about its subject. These sites' subjects range from the Grand Canyon to the Democratic Party to breast cancer. Anything you want to know?

On the TV news, a businessman-patron of SIBL exults that he has in half an hour found exactly what he needs by using an online database. I do not know, of course, what this man was looking for or what he found. My own experience tells me this: he found something, and he took it. He may have performed a "keyword search." The database yielded a result. A database, mind you, with the imprimatur of the New York Public Library. The "answer" is retrieved. Let us gush about it on TV. The poor man wishes devoutly to believe that research is a breeze. Vice President Gore and Rep. Gingrich tell him it ought to be. It is not. And therein lies the rub.

Research and learning are about one thing above all others: the sustained and consecutive reading of texts. And what medium has proved itself to be by far the best for the sustained reading of texts? The cathode-ray screen? No. Ink on paper. What SIBL and its ilk demonstrate is that the "knowledge society" of the twenty-first century may be about all sorts of wondrous things. One thing it is not about is the sustained and consecutive reading of texts. Put another way, one thing it is not about is research and learning.

Most telling of all is a quotation on one of SIBL's walls. It is the beautiful remark of John Ruskin: "Life without industry is guilt; industry without art is brutality." Truer words have never been uttered. But I wonder: do the library people who selected this quotation realize that John Ruskin does not mean "industry" in quite the sense in which the word is used in "Science, Industry, and Business"? I suspect they went to an electronic database and, in search of an apt quotation, entered the keyword "industry"—and this is what they got. Clearly, the barbarians are inside the gates.

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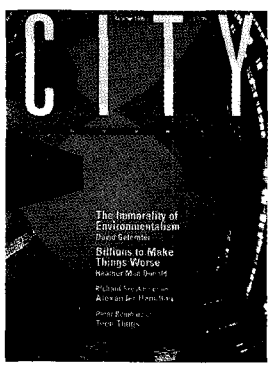

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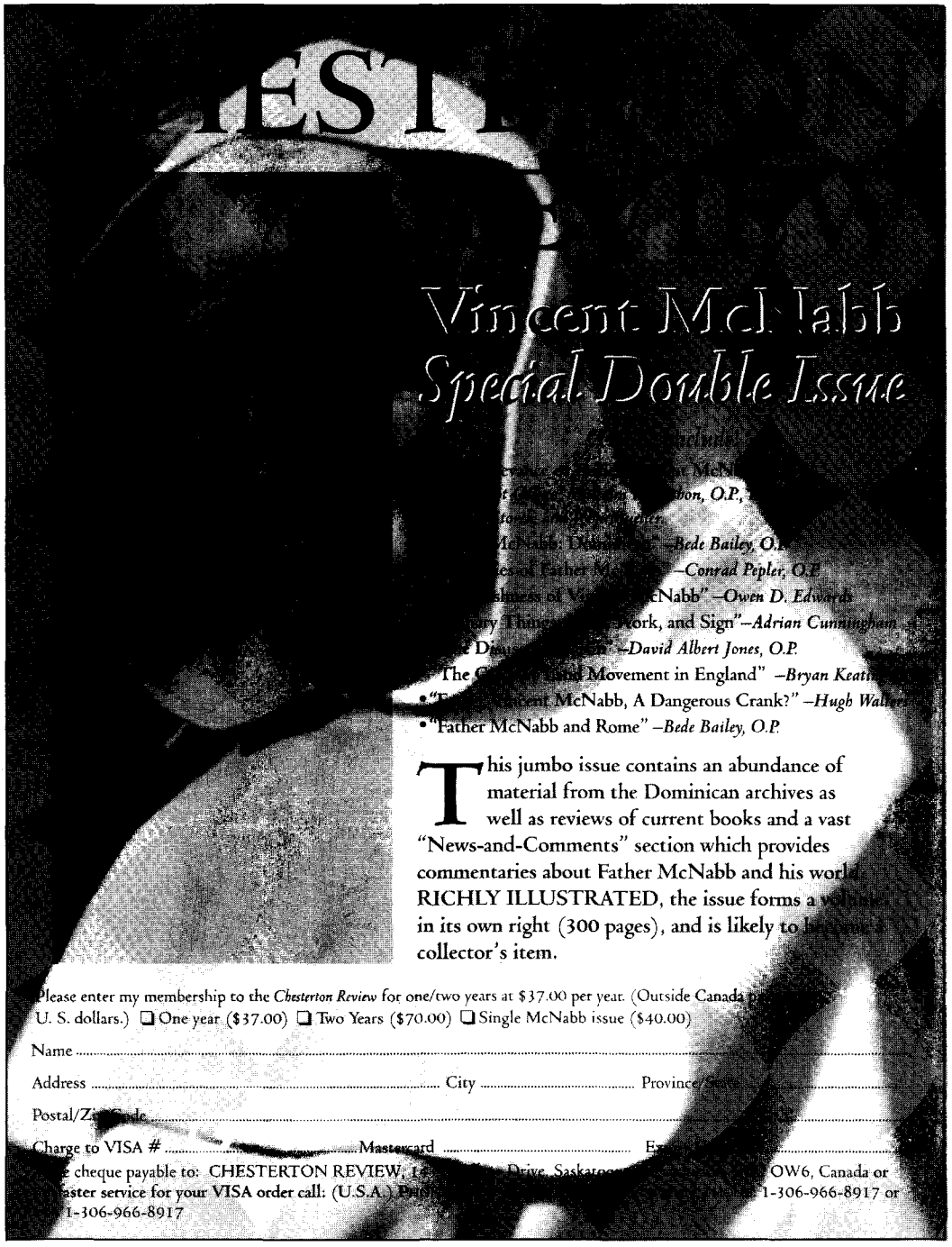
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- **S** **Edwin Newman:** *Decline and Fall of American Language* (55 min.)
- **T** **J. Robert Oppenheimer:** *Relevance of Literature to Science* (19 min.)
- **U** **Asimov & Pohl:** *Science Fiction: The Early Days* (55 min.)
- **V** **William Saroyan:** *The Real World of the Writer* (48 min.)
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- **X** **Stephen Spender:** *T.S. Eliot and George Orwell* (41 min.)
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